

Color a Fold-Out Poster for Your Room ★ An All-New Aggie

November/December 2015

American Girl

americangirlmagazine.com

**Sparkly
holiday
crafts!**

* Adorable
elf portraits

* All-about-you
quizzes

Plus!
Read the
winning story in
our writing contest



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to millions and millions
of one-in-a-million girls.

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Recycle me or pass me on to a friend.



10% post-consumer waste

Contents

Volume 23, Number 6

Follow Your Inner Star™

Girls Express 2

Contest 8
Elf Portraits

Speak Up! 10
Friends

According to Aggie... 12
'Tis the Season

'Tis the Season,
page 12



Hand-Drawn Holidays 14

Magical Memories... 20

Cute and Crafty Cottages 22

Cute and Crafty Cottages,
page 22



Welcome to the Winter Fest! 26



Forever Family 28

Almost Home 32

Winter Wonderland 40

Posters 41

Mini Mag 43

Help! 45

Behind the Scenes 48



Plus AG's
holiday poster and door hangers!



Safety first!

Some of our projects and activities require an adult's help.

When you see this symbol, be sure to ask an adult to work with you.



Girls

E X P R E S S TM

Cozy Cozee

Make a snug sleeve that hugs your favorite cup.

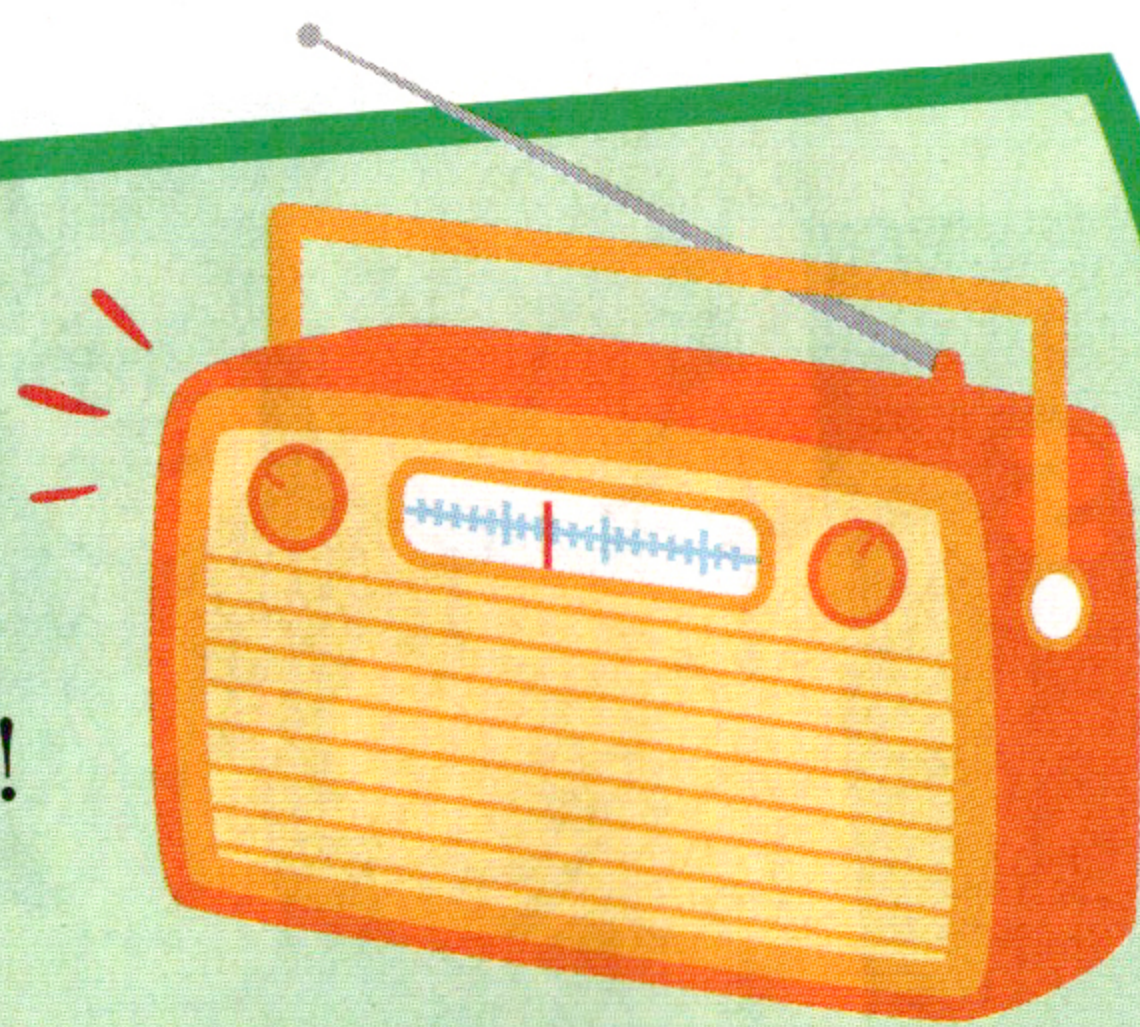
Tape a long piece of yarn to the inside of a cardboard cup sleeve. Wrap the yarn around the cup sleeve, pulling it through the sleeve and around again. Continue to wrap the yarn around the sleeve until the entire cardboard surface is covered.

Secure the end of the yarn inside the sleeve with a piece of duct tape. Add fabric embellishments using adhesive dots or tie a pretty bow around the wrapped sleeve to add some extra flair. Slip the sleeve over your cup or give it to a parent or teacher as a present!



True Story

Lian gets to play all her favorite music—on her own radio show!



Dear American Girl,

If someone ever said to you, "Oh, you get your own radio show," it would be a shock, right? Like, astonishing, but also really exciting. That happened to me when I was eight.

It all started at a benefit for a local radio station. A deejay asked if I wanted to announce the prizes. I was nervous, but I did it. It was really fun. Later, the radio station offered me my own show. Of course I said, "Yes!"

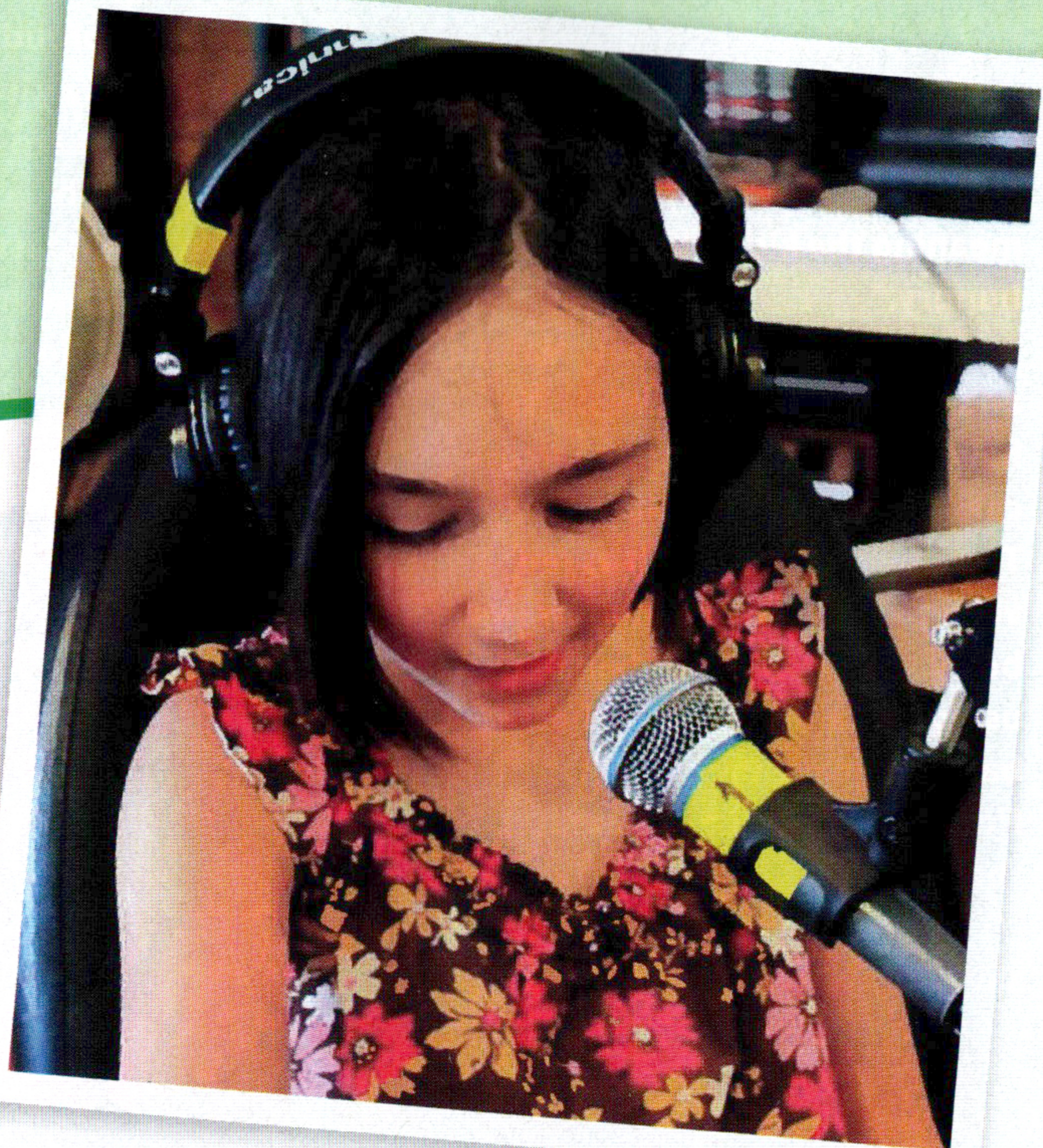
In the studio each week, I slip on headphones and push the button to turn on the microphone. Then I play my favorite music (all female artists) for an hour. I love bluegrass and pop the best. Sometimes people call in to make requests.

Being a deejay is pretty special. Once I met some kids who asked if I was the girl on the radio. That made me proud. It's good to know I have a few fans, because sometimes I wonder if anyone's listening out there.

Sincerely,

Lian S.

Age 11, Vermont



Meet a Reader's Pet

11-year-old Abi P. of Illinois shares a time her dog was mischievous over the holidays.



Abi P.

Age 11, Illinois



What's your pet's name?

Coconut.

Describe a time your pet made you laugh:

She always makes us laugh! She has a huge personality for such a little dog.

How would you describe your pet in three words?

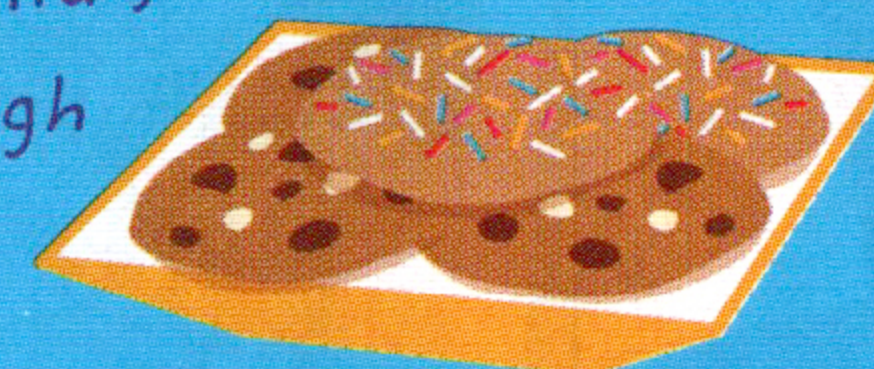
Awesome. Playful. Cute.

Describe a time your pet was naughty:

One Christmas Eve, we put cookies out for Santa and apples out for the reindeer. We set them on a little table by the fireplace and went upstairs to get ready for bed. When we came back down to turn off the lights, the cookies were gone!

Santa did not eat the cookies. And it wasn't the reindeer. It was Coconut! Look at her face—she was trying to look very innocent.

Now we leave Santa's cookies on the high kitchen counter.



Shining Stars

Nine-year-old twins Natalia (left) and Gaby (right) have been up to their elbows in mixing bowls since they were three years old. That's when they started baking cookies and cupcakes during visits to their grandmother's house.

When they were six, their mom made a suggestion. "She told us, hey, it's time that we give back," Gaby says. "So we looked for a charity that we liked and we found one called No Kid Hungry."

Natalia and Gaby made big plans. They called themselves the "Lil Cupcake Girls" and have been baking and selling cupcakes ever since. They have also filled orders for baby showers. Once they made 100 cupcakes for a wedding. They donate the money they earn to No Kid Hungry. The organization

provides meals to kids who might otherwise go hungry.

"Helping others is a great way to be kind and humble," Natalia says. "Plus it just makes me, my mom, and my sister happy."

In the past three years, the girls have raised about \$4,000—that's a lot of cupcakes! Every batch involves planning, shopping, baking, decorating, and packaging. They also have to clean up, like after the time the mixer sent flour flying all over the kitchen in their Florida home.

"Sometimes it's hard," Gaby says, "but then I think of how it's not always easy for them, either—meaning the kids who might be hungry."

To get their work done, Natalia and Gaby bake in batches. "We have a 24-cupcake pan, a 12-cupcake pan, and a six," Natalia says. They make flavors such as red velvet, chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, and strawberry-banana, using sparkling water in the batter to make the cupcakes fluffy. Natalia usually operates the mixer.

"She's great at that," Gaby says. "And if there are chunks

in the batter, she uses a whisk."

The girls take turns frosting and decorating. "Once Gaby decorated a red velvet cupcake with tiny marshmallows, cut up and arranged on the frosting to look like a flower," Natalia says. "She really puts her heart into it."

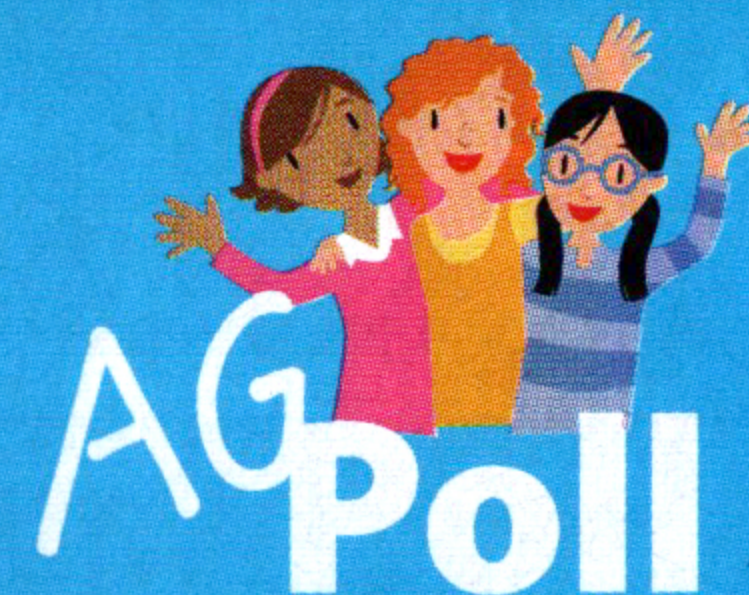
One of the sweetest things about baking cupcakes to raise money for charity is spending time together, especially when their grandmother comes to help.

"Donating to No Kid Hungry makes me feel proud," Gaby says. "It's important to give back, especially since there are children out there who don't have what they need to eat breakfast, eat lunch, or eat dinner." One cupcake, she says, can make a lot of meals.

You can shine, too.

If you're interested in raising money for a good cause, ask a parent if you can hold your own bake sale and donate the money to a charity you're passionate about. You and a parent can learn more about For Goodness Bake by visiting americangirl.com/fgb-news.





Answer these questions, and then turn the page to see how your answers compare to those of other AG readers.

Nice Icing

Gaby and Natalia explain how to frost the perfect cupcake.



- * Make sure your cupcake has cooled down before you add the frosting. If it's still warm, the frosting will melt right off!

We like to use a piping bag when we frost our cupcakes. If you squeeze the piping bag evenly and move it in a circular motion, it creates a pretty frosting swirl.

- * You can use colored frosting to make your cupcake more creative. And don't forget to add your favorite sprinkles when doing the final touches. We also like to use a cute wrapper to dress up the cupcake.

- * Our favorite frosting is our signature cream cheese buttercream.



I like making the buttercream frosting pink and Natalia likes teal or purple.



Go to page 48 to see Gaby and Natalia's yummy buttercream frosting recipe.



What's your favorite thing to do during the holidays?

- * Open presents
- * Give presents
- * Spend time with family
- * Decorate the house

What kind of gifts do you like to make for your family?

- * Baked goodies
- * Original artwork
- * Holiday cards
- * Handmade fashions

What's the best thing about winter?

- * The holidays
- * Hot chocolate
- * Playing in the snow
- * Ice skating

AG Poll

What girls told us online

What's your favorite thing to do during the holidays?

45%

Open presents

14%

Give presents

What kind of gifts do you like to make for your family?

32%

Baked goodies

25%

Holiday cards

What's the best thing about winter?

46%

The holidays

19%

Playing in the snow



28%

Spend time with family

13%

Decorate the house

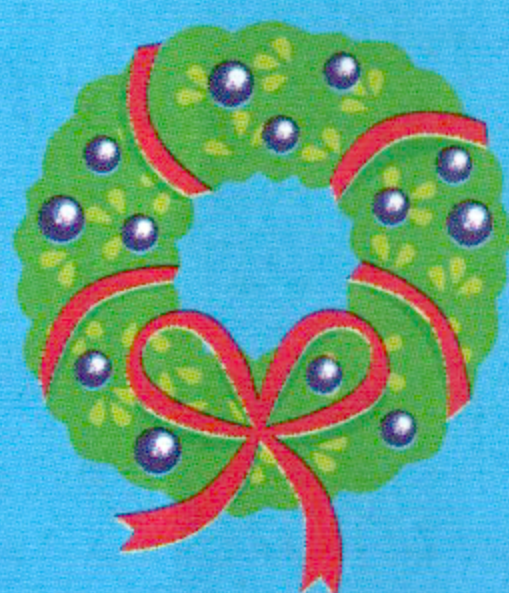


28%

Original artwork

15%

Handmade fashions



19%

Hot chocolate

16%

Ice skating

To answer our weekly poll question, go to americangirl.com/playmagazine

Girls Express

Mini Quiz

Thank-full

Which Thanksgiving pie matches your personality?

1. Which shoes would you like to wear?



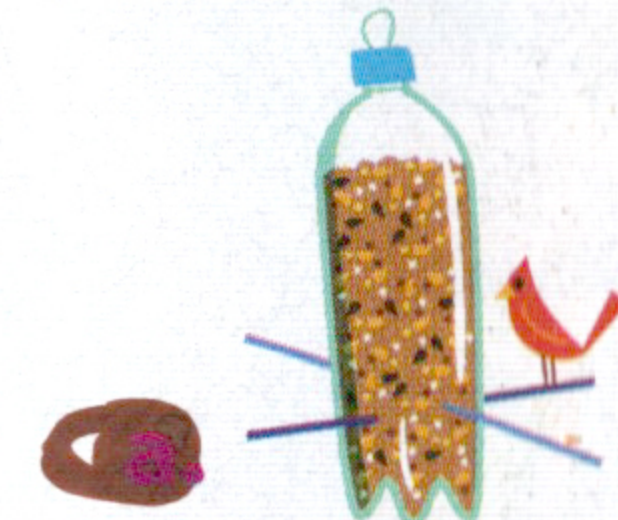
b.



2. Which journal would be yours?



3. Which gift would you make for a friend?



4. Which instrument would you like to try?



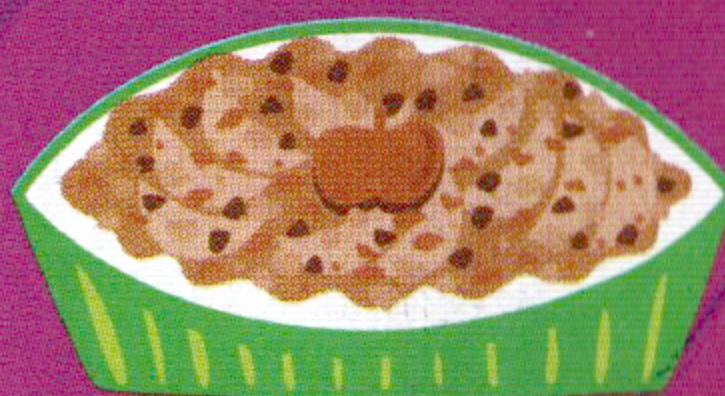
5. How would you like to cruise around?



Answers

Mostly a's

Outdoor Apple Crisp



Mostly b's

Practical Pumpkin



Mostly c's

Dreamy Banana Cream



AG Art Gallery

Our readers love to take pictures of their pups in the snow!

Help us fill our gallery!
Send color copies of
your **original artwork**
or **photos** to the address
below. Sorry, we
can't return entries.



Nicole J.
Age 11, Connecticut



Katherine K.
Age 12, Virginia



Angela G.
Age 13, Pennsylvania

Write to Us!

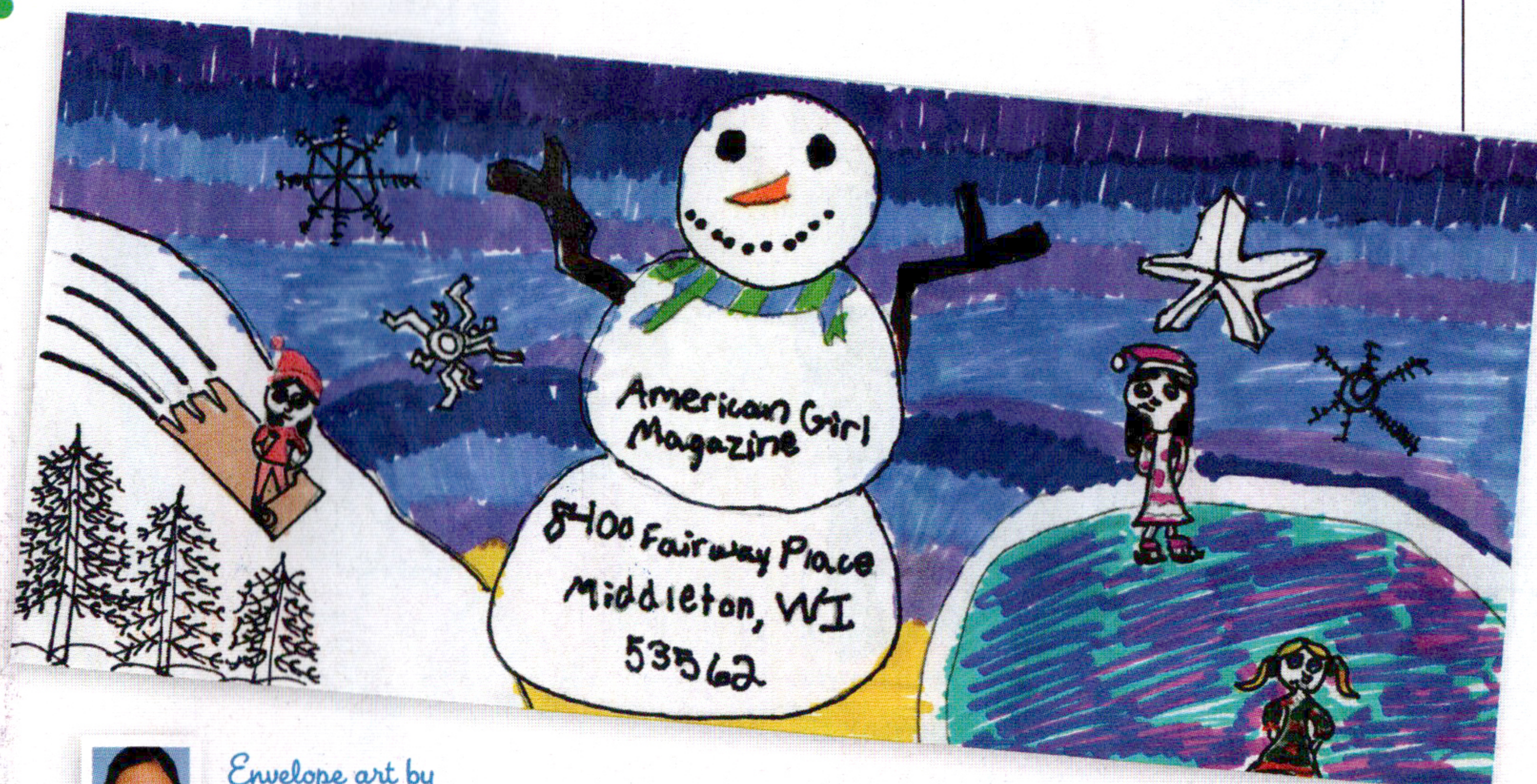
Be sure to include your

- * First and last name
- * Address and phone number
- * Birth date, including year
- * School photo or other portrait
- * Parent's signature

Send us a cool envelope!

Print our address neatly on the front
and your return address and the
section of the magazine you're
writing to on the back.

We can't print every letter, but we
read everything you send to us.
Hope to hear from you soon! ★



Envelope art by
Sarah Y.
Age 12, Kentucky

Contest 

Elf Portraits

These girls created elves that look like themselves!

Super Elf



Chiara D.
Age 10, Arizona



Perfect Patterns



Claire O.
Age 9, Iowa



Really Rainbow



Emily J.
Age 11, Pennsylvania

Candy Cane Cutie



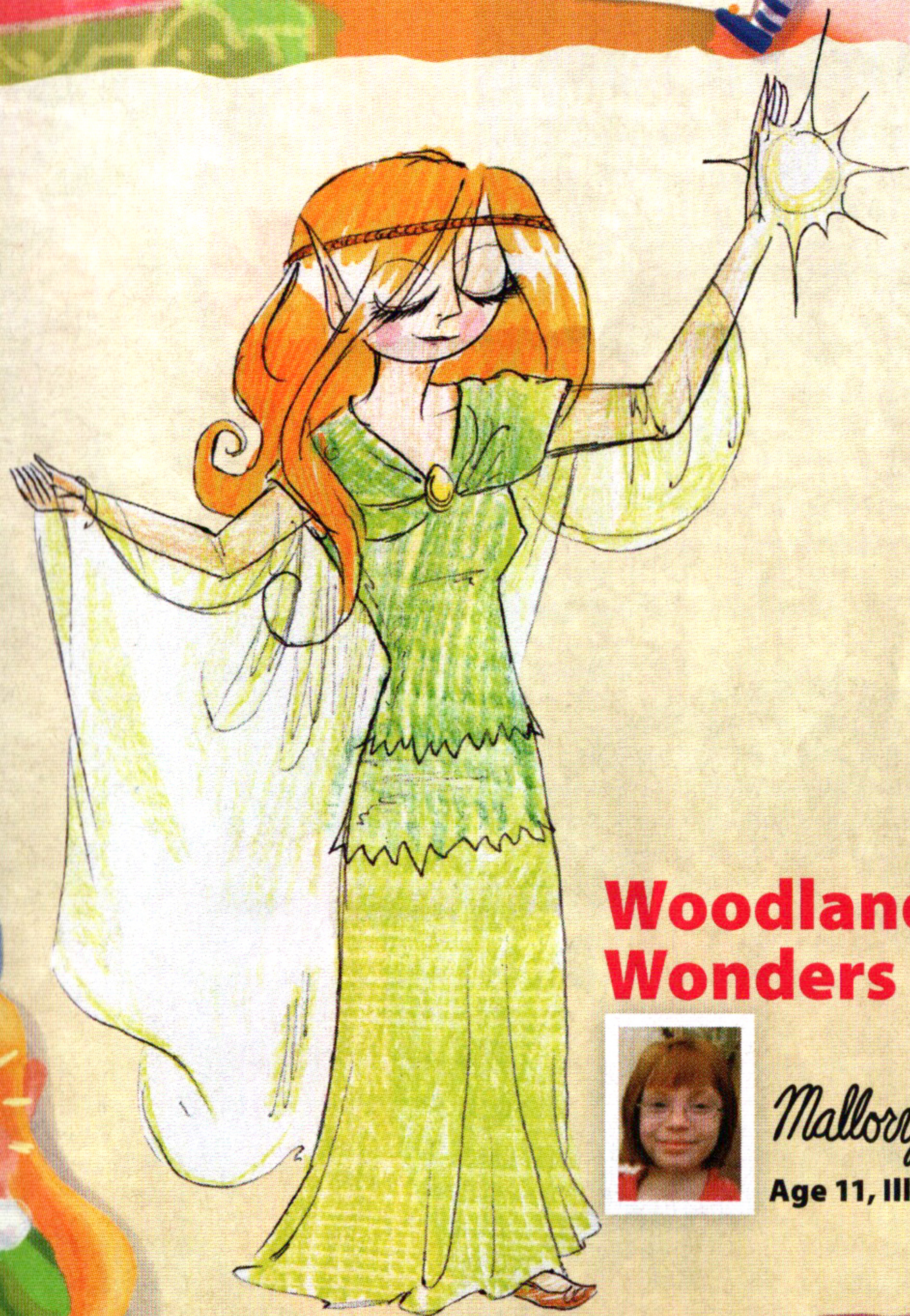
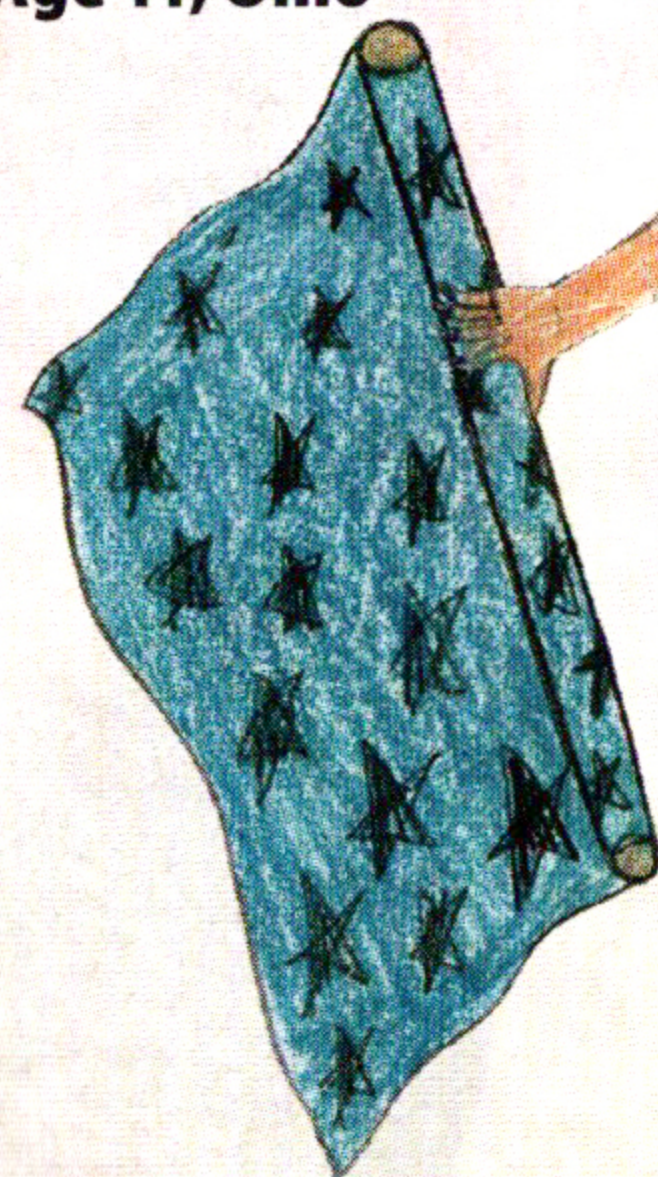
Christina V.
Age 9, California



Stylish Snowelf



Torrie F.
Age 11, Ohio



Woodland Wonders



Mallory M.
Age 11, Illinois



Painted Pretty



Mallory M.
Age 11, Montana



New Contest: Sweet Sailboats

Calling all sea-lovers! Design a unique sailboat and we will add the water and passengers! Does your ship have sparkly sails? Or maybe it has a daring name or a one-of-a-kind paint job? To send us your original sailboat design, follow the instructions on page 7. **Postmark deadline: December 10, 2015. Winners will appear in the May/June 2016 issue. Sorry—we can't return entries.** ★

Friends

Which word describes your friendship best?

- * Fun 43%
- * Silly 22%
- * Real 16%
- * Honest 12%
- * Sporty 7%

Do you want some of my carrots?

What are you most likely to share?

- * Snacks 59%
- * Clothes 15%
- * A stuffed animal 9%
- * A notebook 9%
- * A device 8%

What's your favorite thing to do with a friend on a Saturday afternoon?

- * Play outside 35%
- * Do crafts 19%
- * Play games 18%
- * Watch movies 17%
- * Practice a sport 11%

How do you make friends?

- * You introduce yourself in a friendly way **52%**
- * You give a compliment **19%**
- * You invite others to play a game with you **13%**
- * You ask questions **9%**
- * You offer your help **7%**

Is this seat taken?

Nope. Please join us!

What would be a dream trip with your best friend?

- * The beach **43%**
- * A theme park **24%**
- * A faraway summer camp **12%**
- * Visiting museums in New York City **11%**
- * A concert **10%**

How many very close friends do you have?

- * Four or more **44%**
- * Two **19%**
- * Three **15%**
- * One **14%**
- * None **8%**



Coming Up: Food

1. What's the best sleepover food?

- a. Tacos
- b. Pizza
- c. Subs
- d. Spaghetti
- e. Other (please specify)

2. What kind of restaurant would you like to own? Describe it.

3. Which meal do you like best?

- a. Breakfast
- b. Lunch
- c. Dinner

4. Which dessert do you like best?

- a. Cookies
- b. Ice Cream
- c. Pudding
- d. Cupcakes
- e. Pie

5. What kind of cooking do you prefer?

- a. Cooking dinner
- b. Making breakfast
- c. Baking
- d. Making snacks
- e. I don't enjoy cooking

6. What's the best after-school snack?

- a. Fruit
- b. Vegetables
- c. Crackers
- d. Granola bar
- e. Other (please specify)

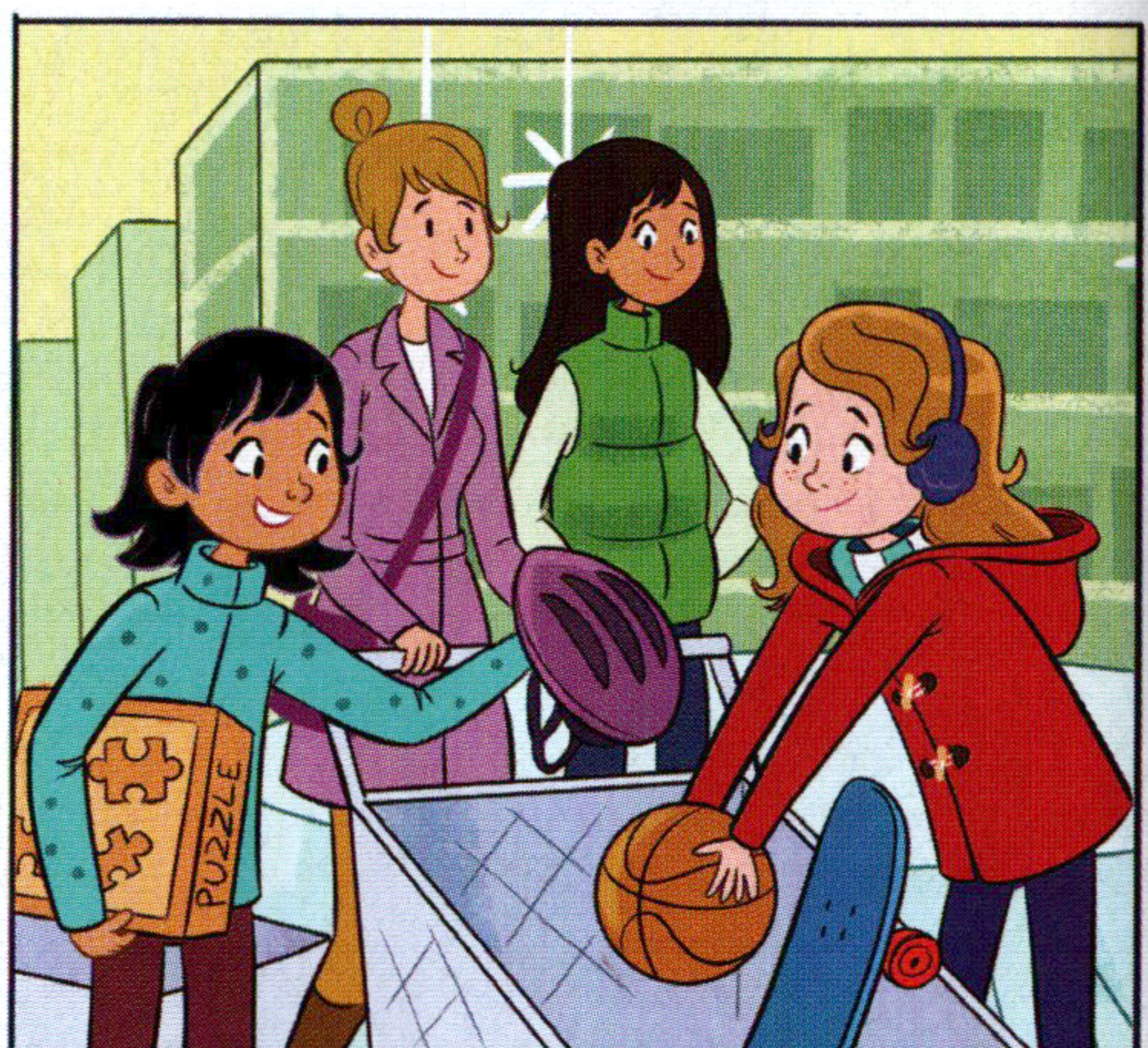
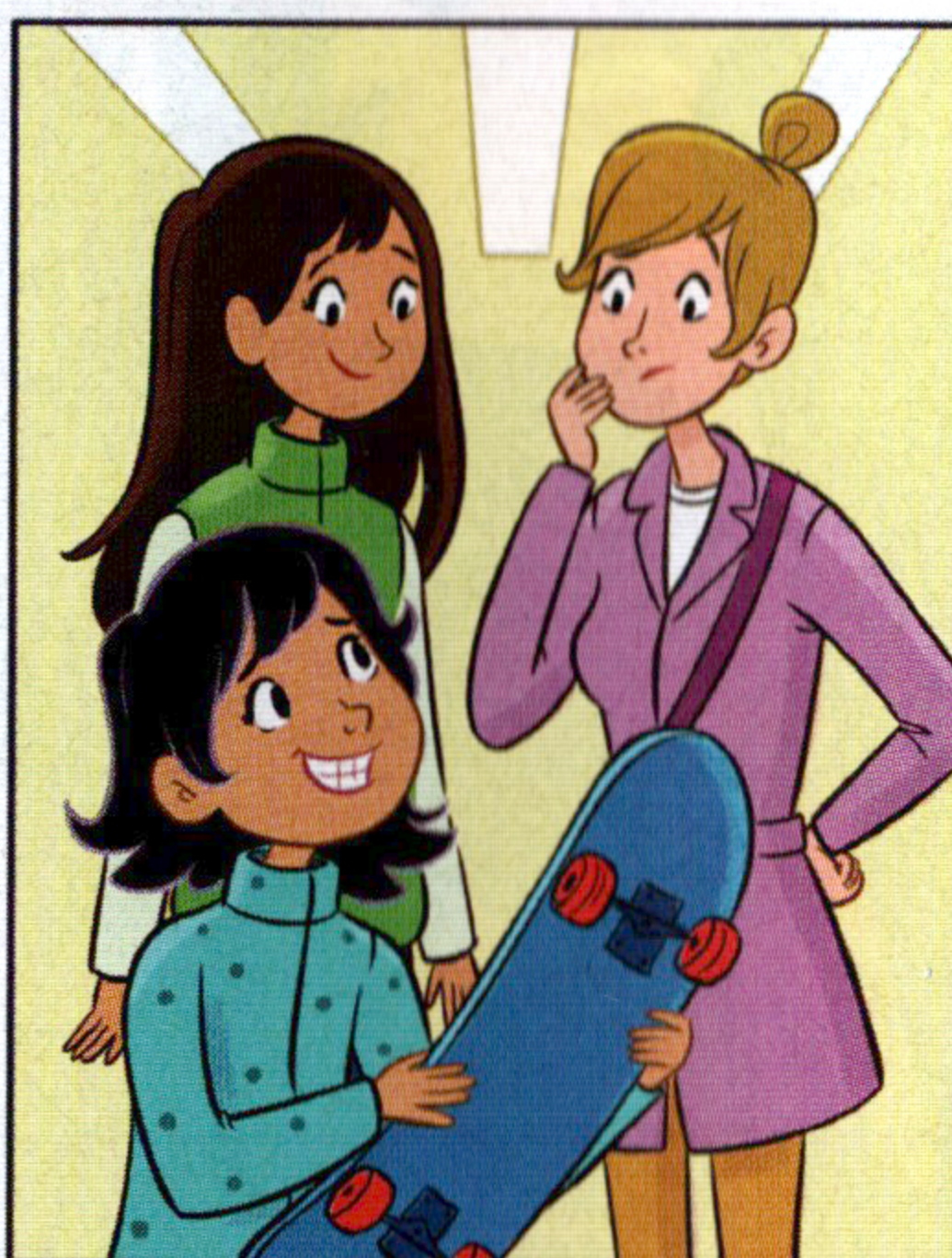
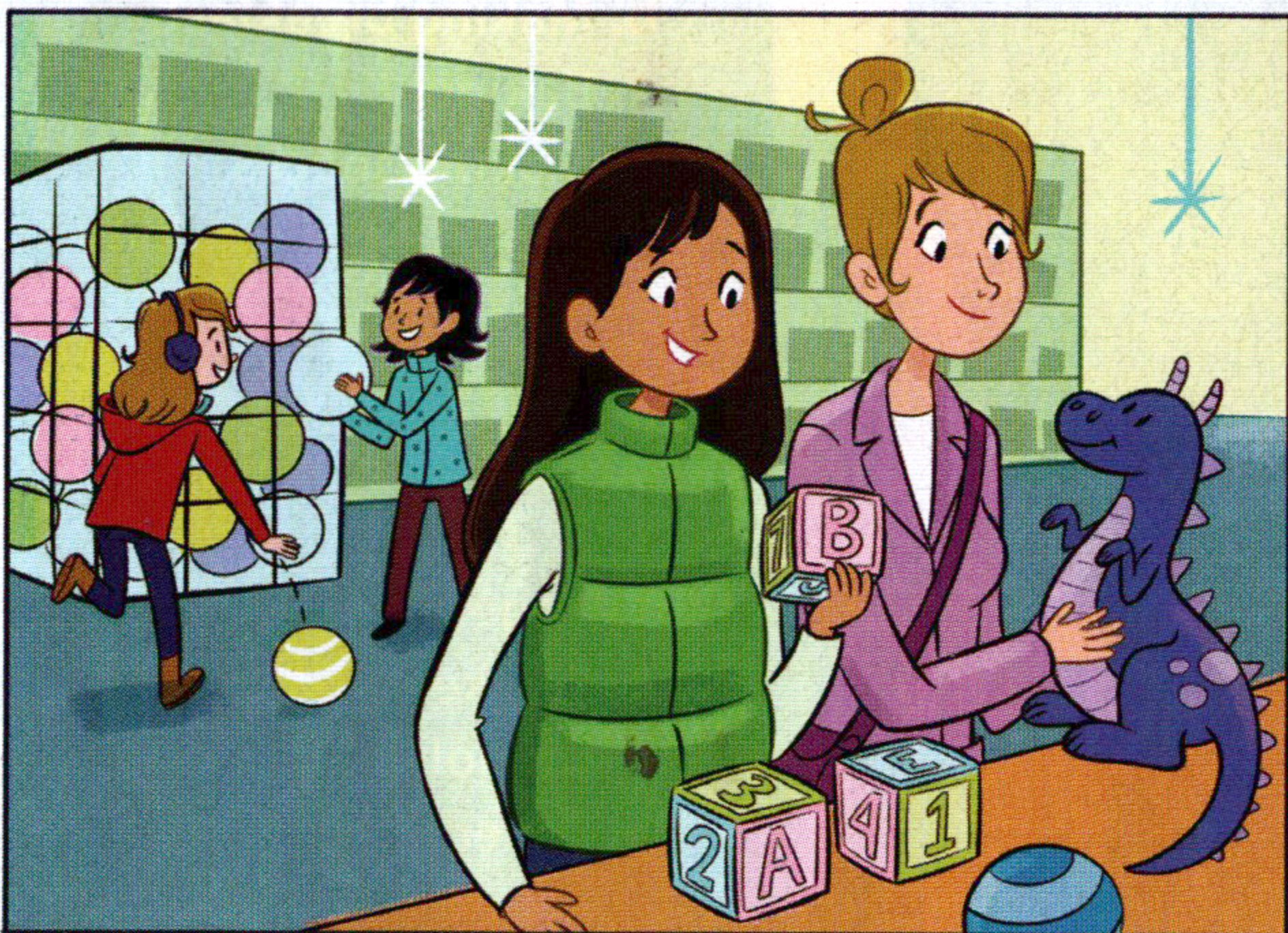
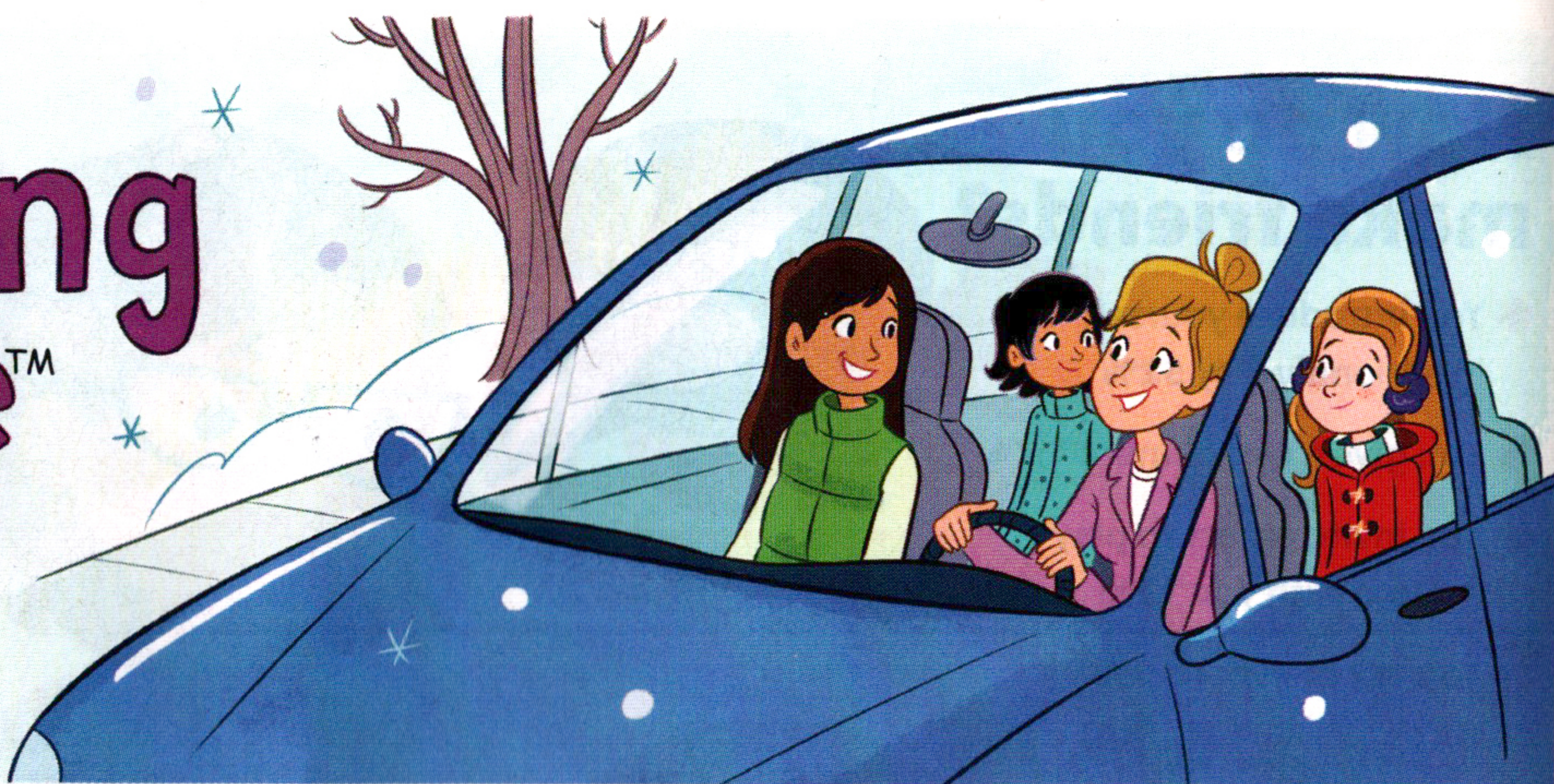
7. What's your favorite food? Draw it.

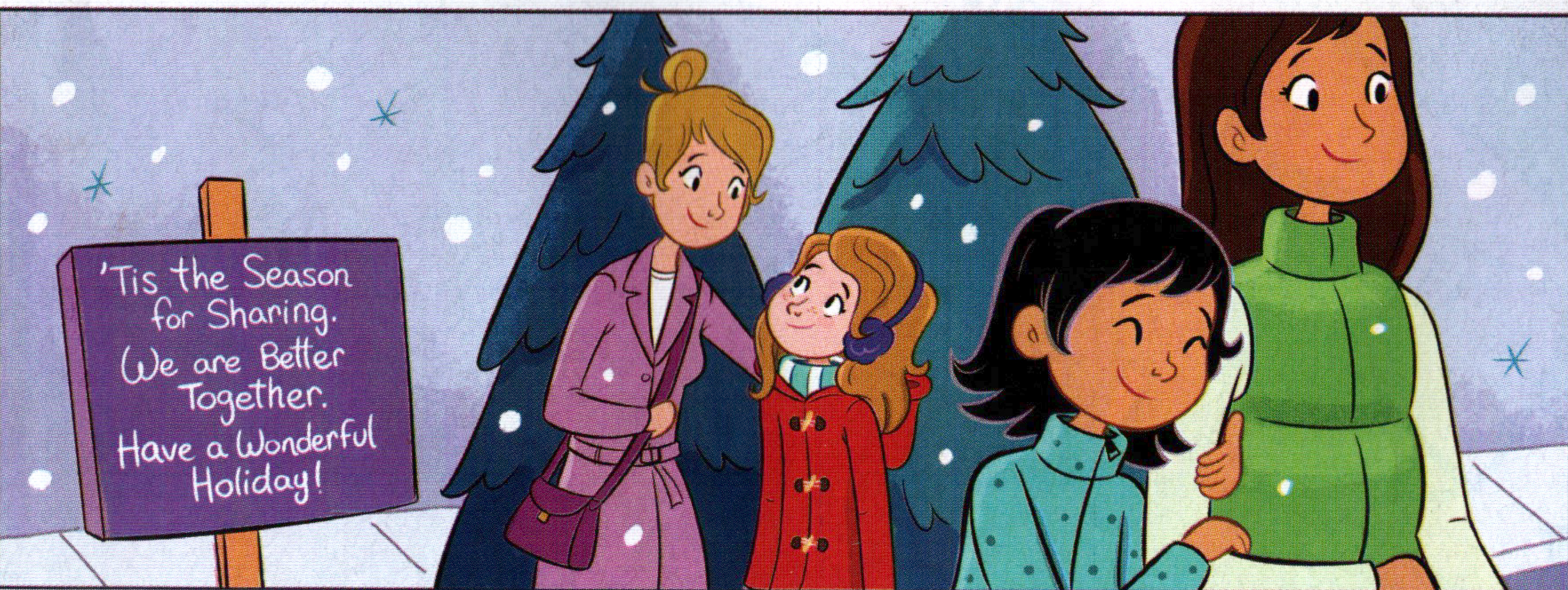
Send your answers to the address on page 7, along with your first and last name, address, school or portrait-style photo, and birth date. Postmark deadline: December 10, 2015. Some answers will appear in the May/June 2016 issue. ★

According to Aggie™

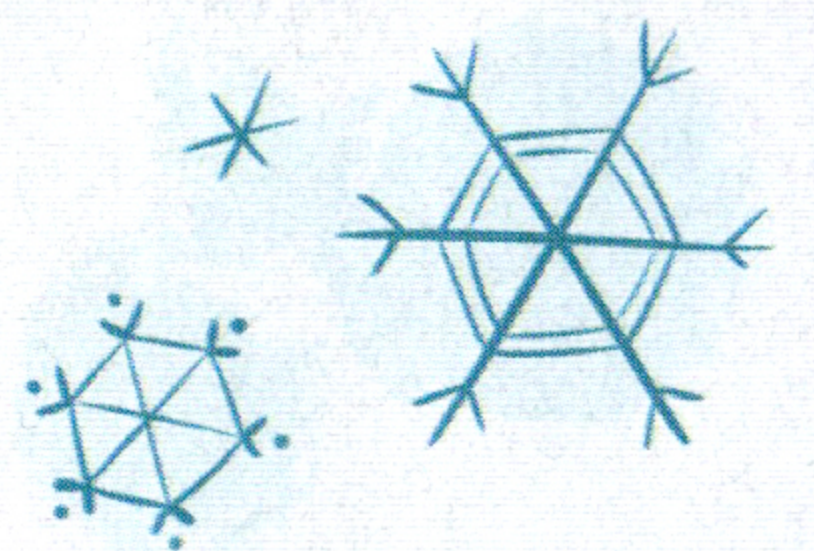
'Tis the Season

Illustrated by Genevieve Kote





Don't miss my next
misadventure:
SNOW DAY!





HAND-DRAWN HOLIDAYS

Use doodles to make dazzling decor and gifts!

MARKER TIPS

Follow these drawing instructions and doodle away!

1. Ask first.



Always get an adult's permission before using markers on any surface.

2. Get ready.

Before you start, cover your work surface. If you're drawing on fabric, place a piece of cardboard underneath.

3. Choose carefully.

Use different types of markers for different surfaces. Nontoxic permanent markers can be used on surfaces such as plastic, cardboard, and paper. For fabric, high-quality nontoxic fabric markers work best.

4. Practice, practice, practice.

Practice doodles on scratch paper first. This will make it easier when you draw on your final surface.

5. Make a rough draft.

Use a pencil to lightly draw the doodle on the final surface. Then trace over the pencil lines with a marker and add color.

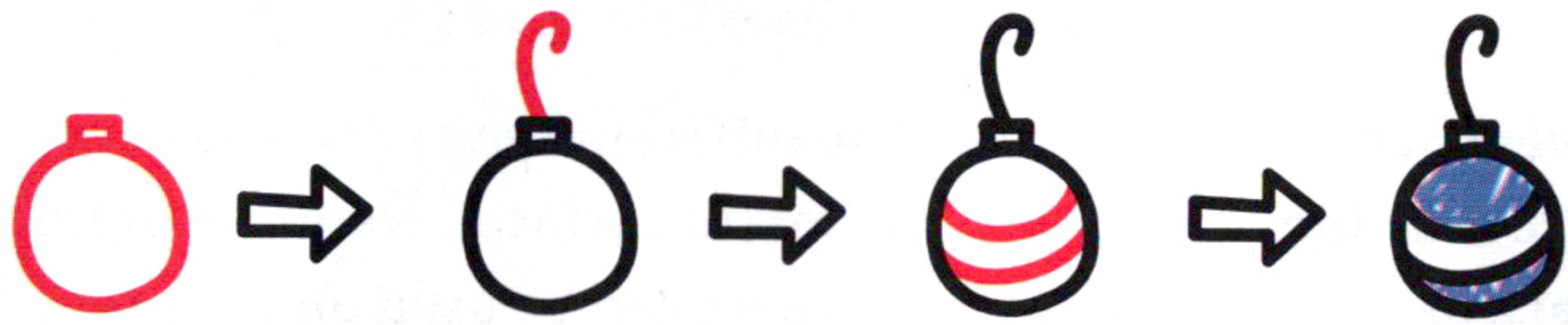
6. Wait.

Don't touch or move your drawings until the ink is dry. Depending on the surface, this could take up to 30 minutes.



CHOOSE YOUR DOODLES

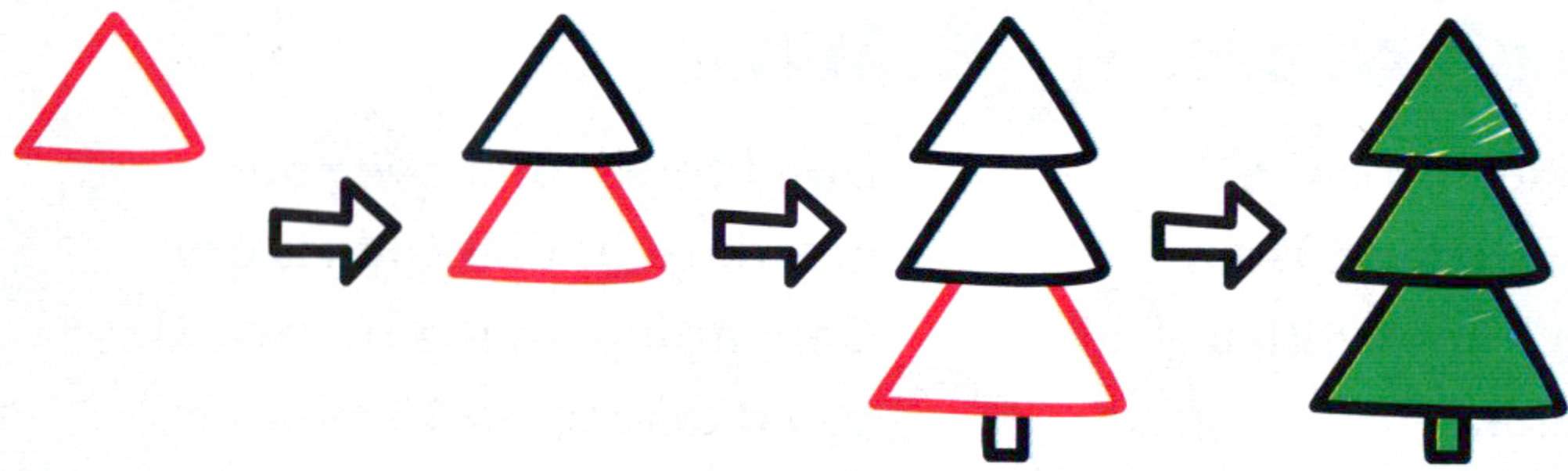
Ornament



Gift



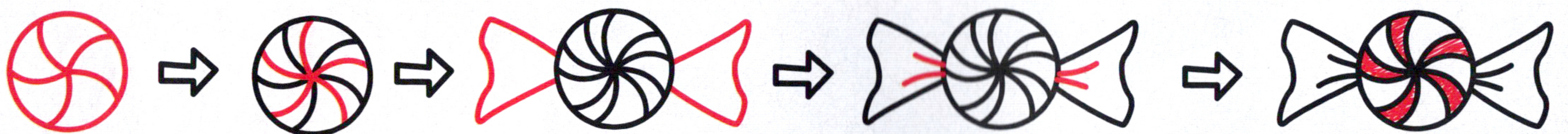
Tree



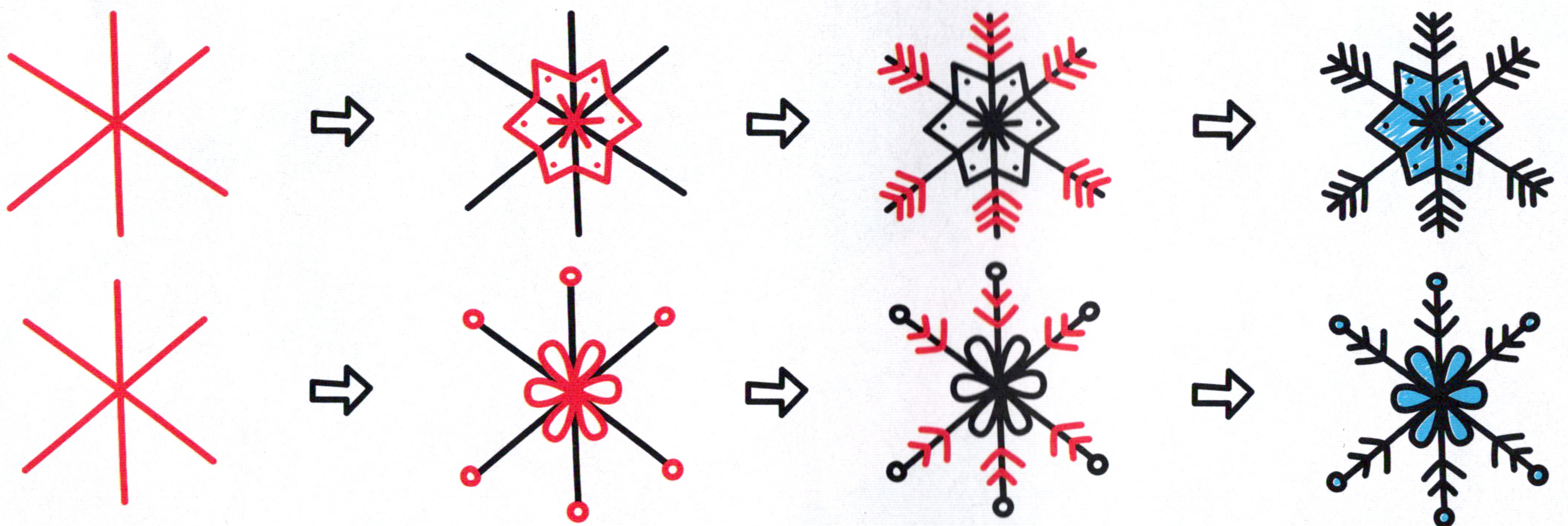
Hat



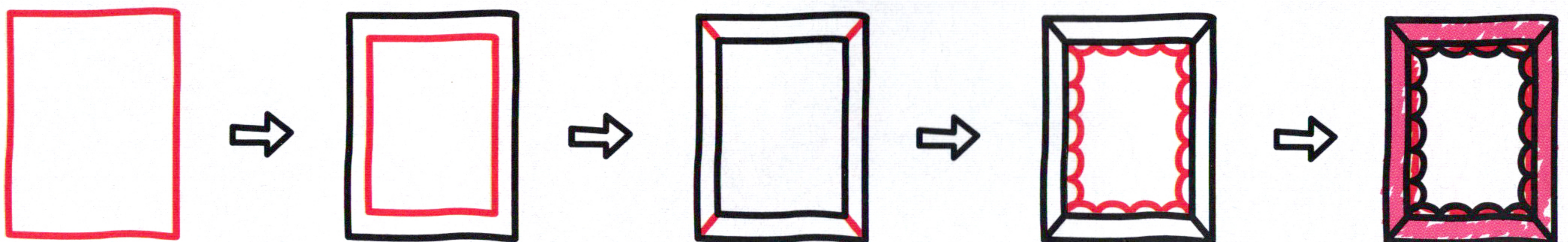
Candy



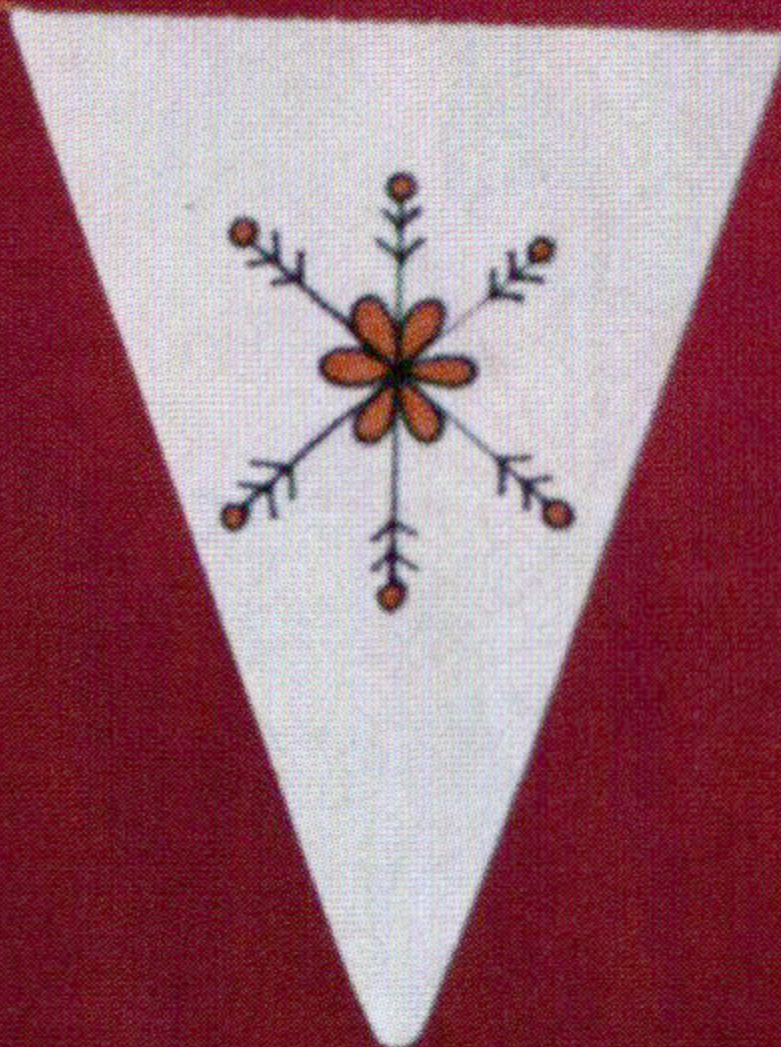
Snowflakes



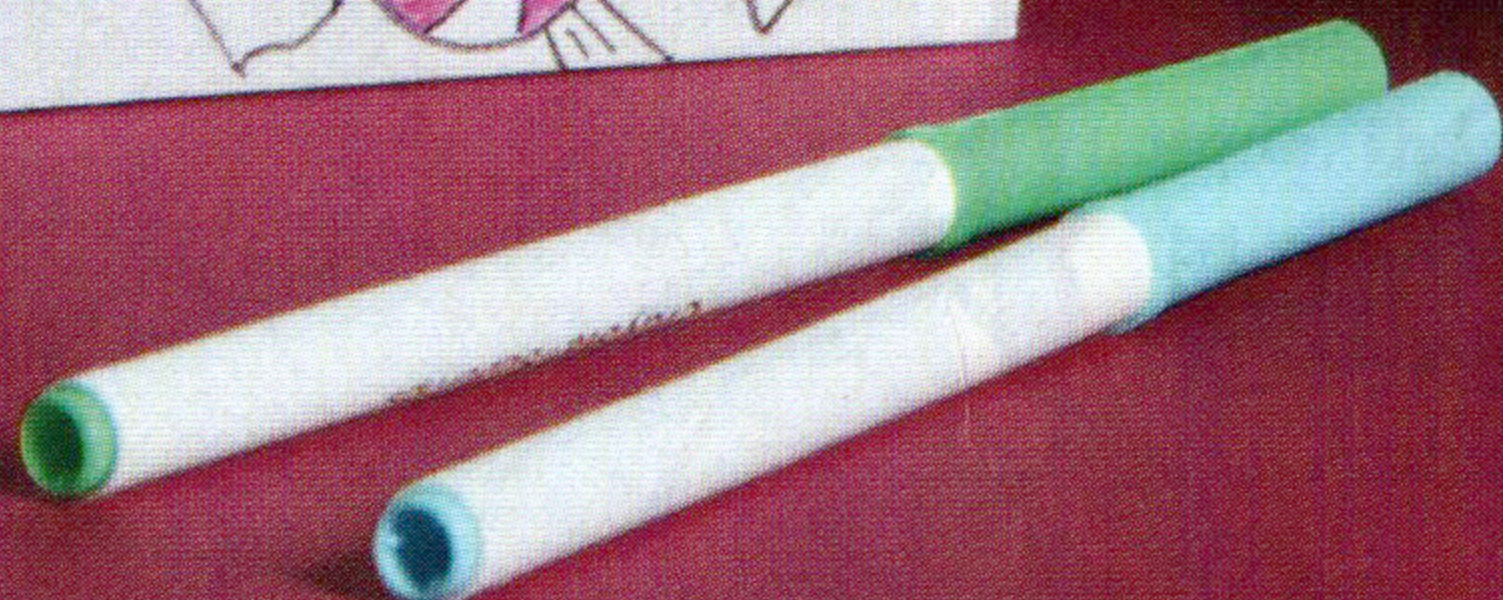
Frame



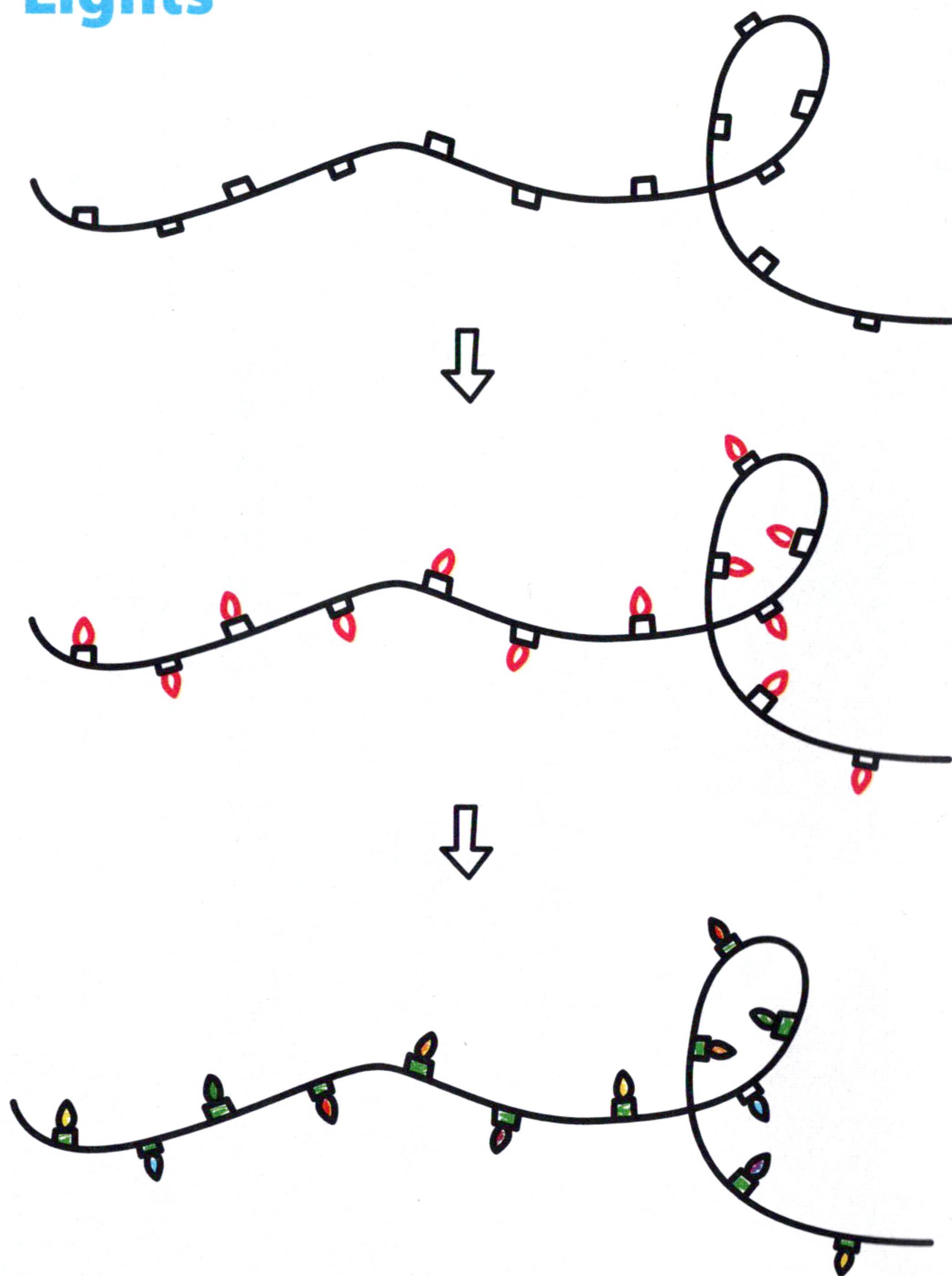
Experiment
with creative ways
of filling in your doodles.
Try different colors,
patterns, and extra
embellishments.



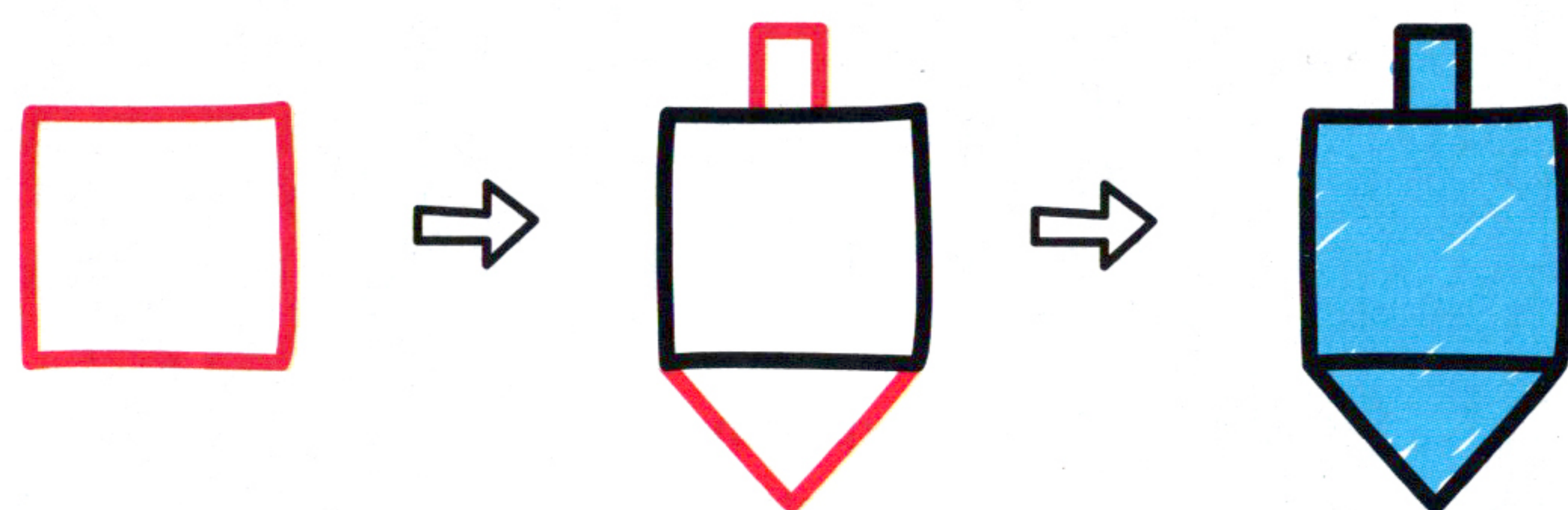
Try using
the same color to
both outline and fill in
your doodle to make
solid shapes like
these trees.



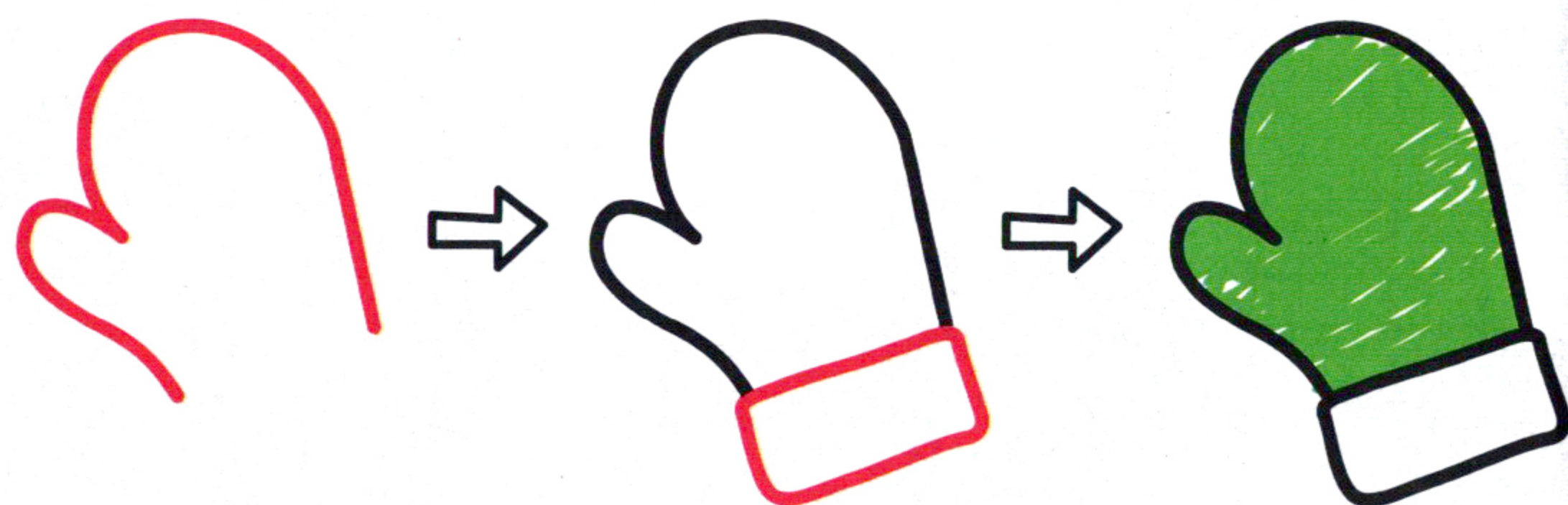
Lights



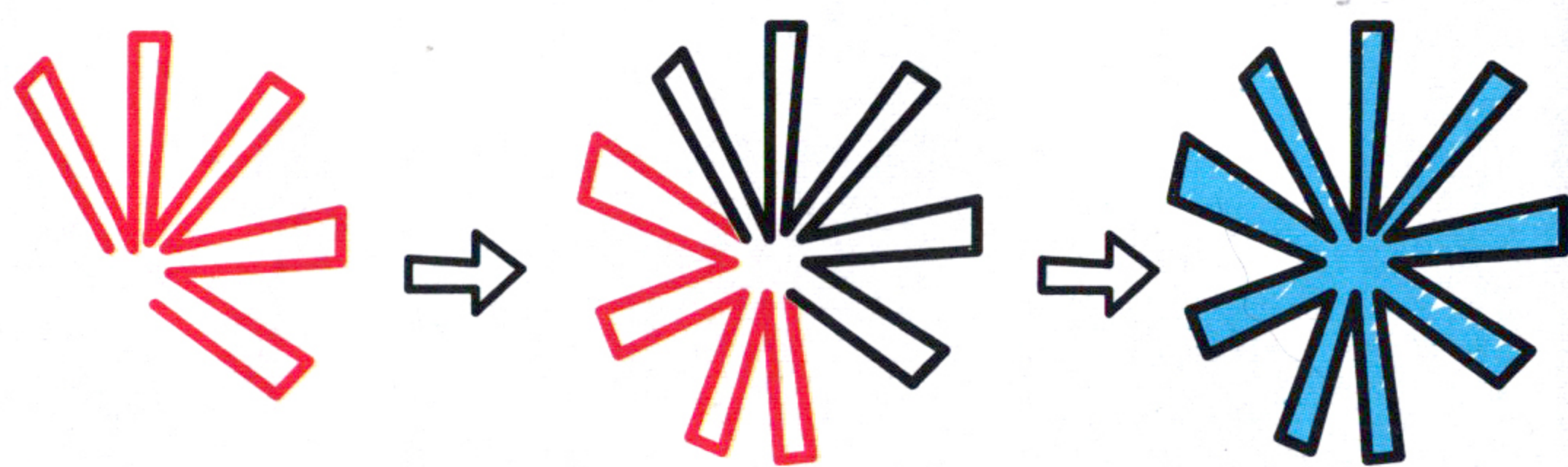
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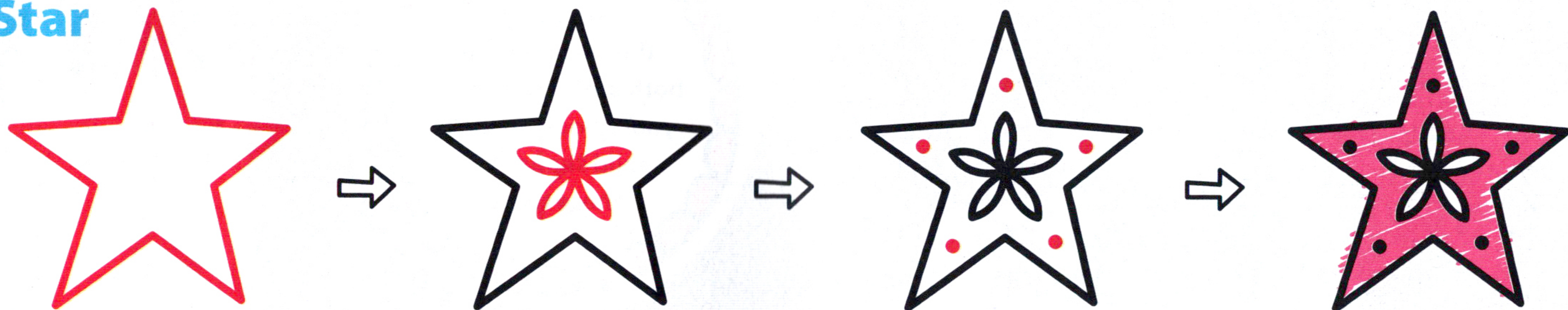
Mitten



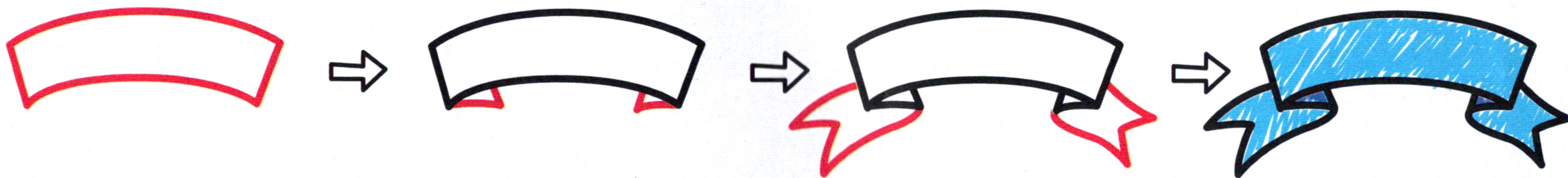
Sparkle



Star



Banner



Bow



Doodles can be large, small, or anything in between! Change the size of your drawings to fit the object you choose to decorate.



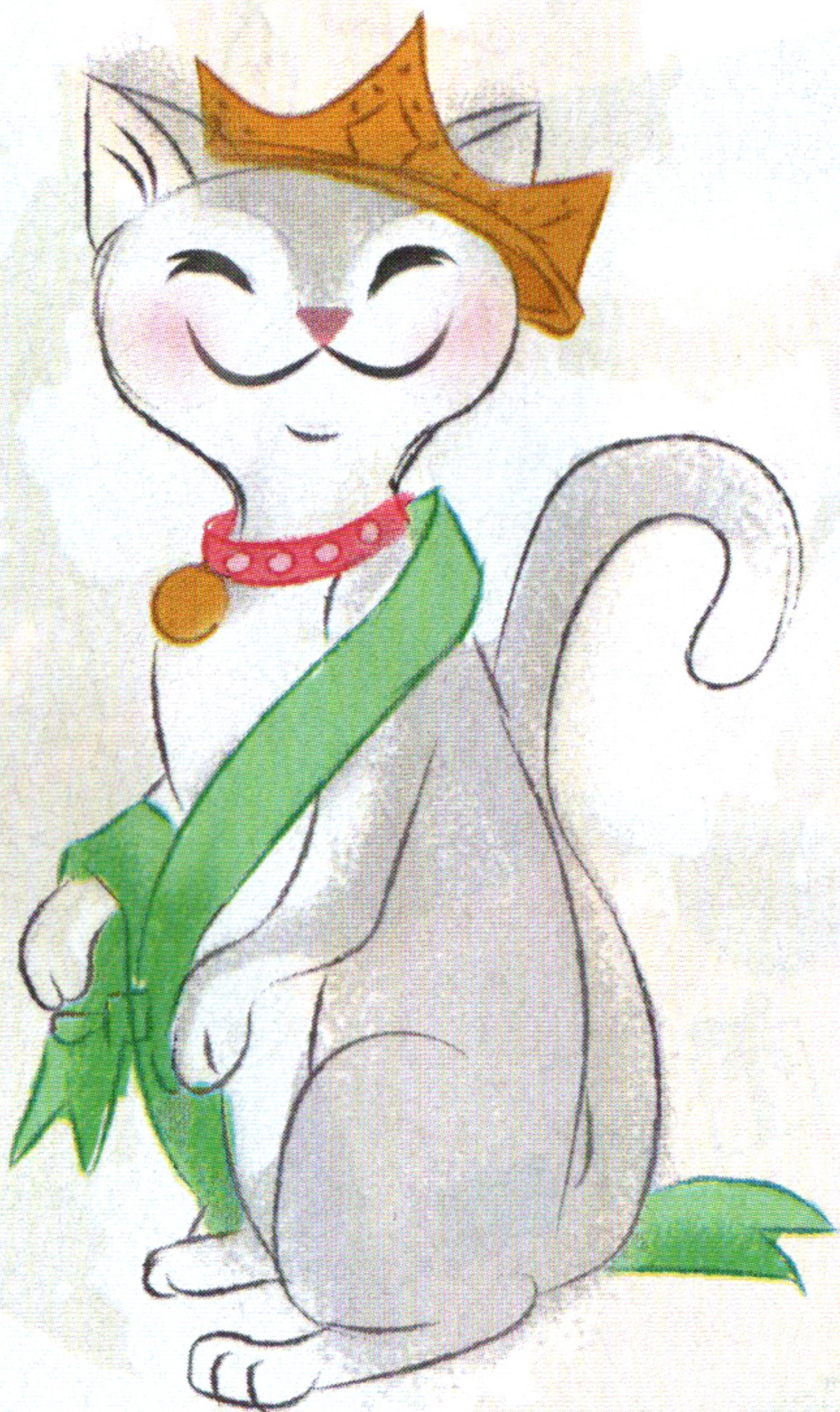
Change details to make each doodle unique. These cards show the same doodles, but in varying sizes and colors. ★

Magical Memories

Celebrate holidays—or any days!—with new family traditions.

King or Queen for a Day

Ask a parent to pick up an inexpensive crown or tiara from a costume shop. Then whenever someone in your family does something great, that person gets to wear it for a little while. Maybe you learned to play a piece of music on the piano—wear the tiara! Or your brother mastered a soccer trick—on with the crown! Reminding someone to wear it is almost as much fun as wearing it yourself.

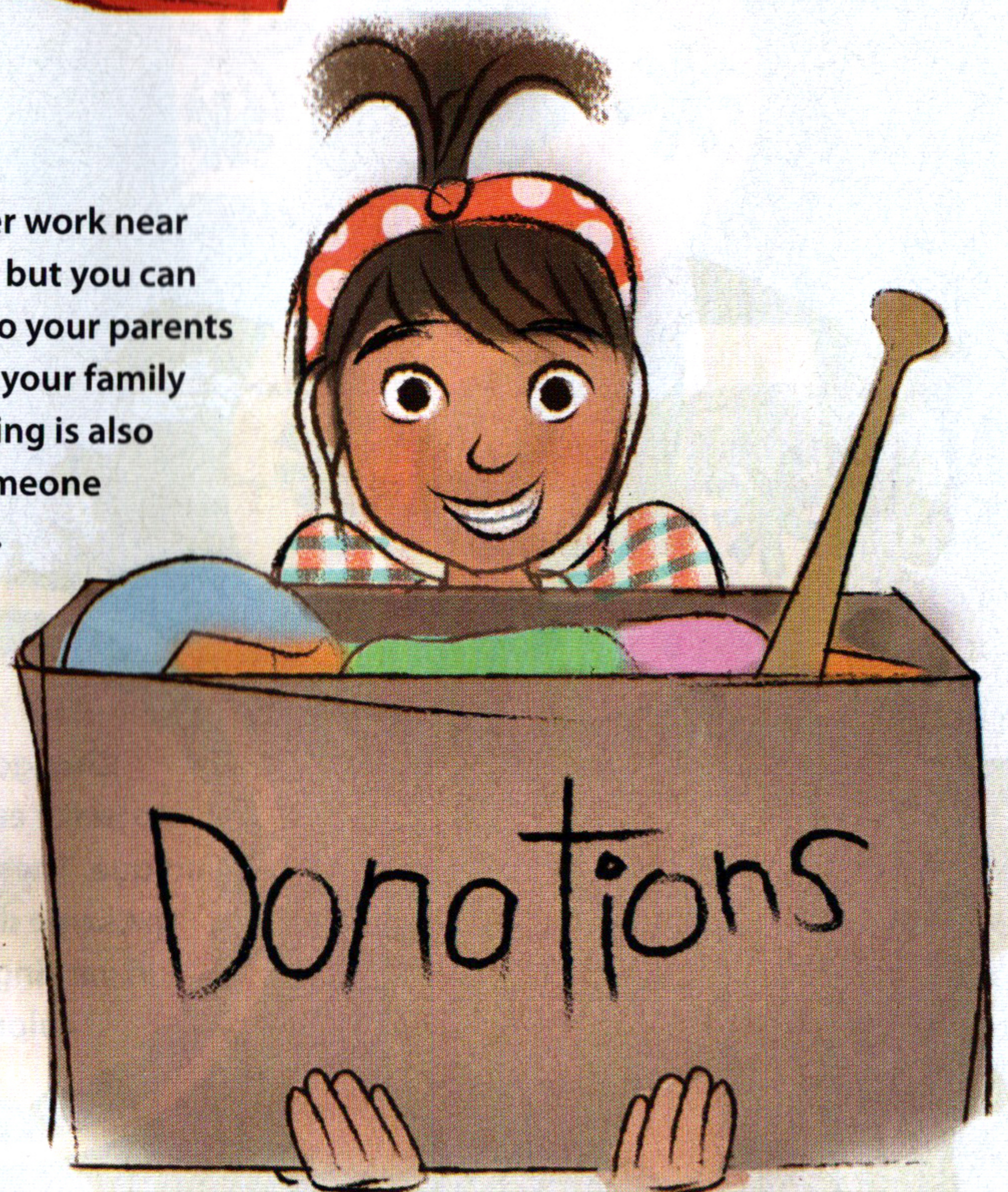


Musical Memories

Play special songs to make memories all year long. “Happy Birthday to You” isn’t the only birthday song in the world—find another one in your family’s music collection, or ask an adult to look for one online that you can stream. Play that song first thing in the morning on each family member’s birthday. Or play a certain song to celebrate going on a vacation, having a snow day, or even the fact that it’s Friday!

Helping Hands

Lots of families do volunteer work near Thanksgiving or Christmas, but you can do it any time of year. Talk to your parents and see if this is something your family can do regularly. Volunteering is also a nice way to remember someone you love who lives far away. If you can’t be with her, let Grandma know you’re helping other people on her birthday.




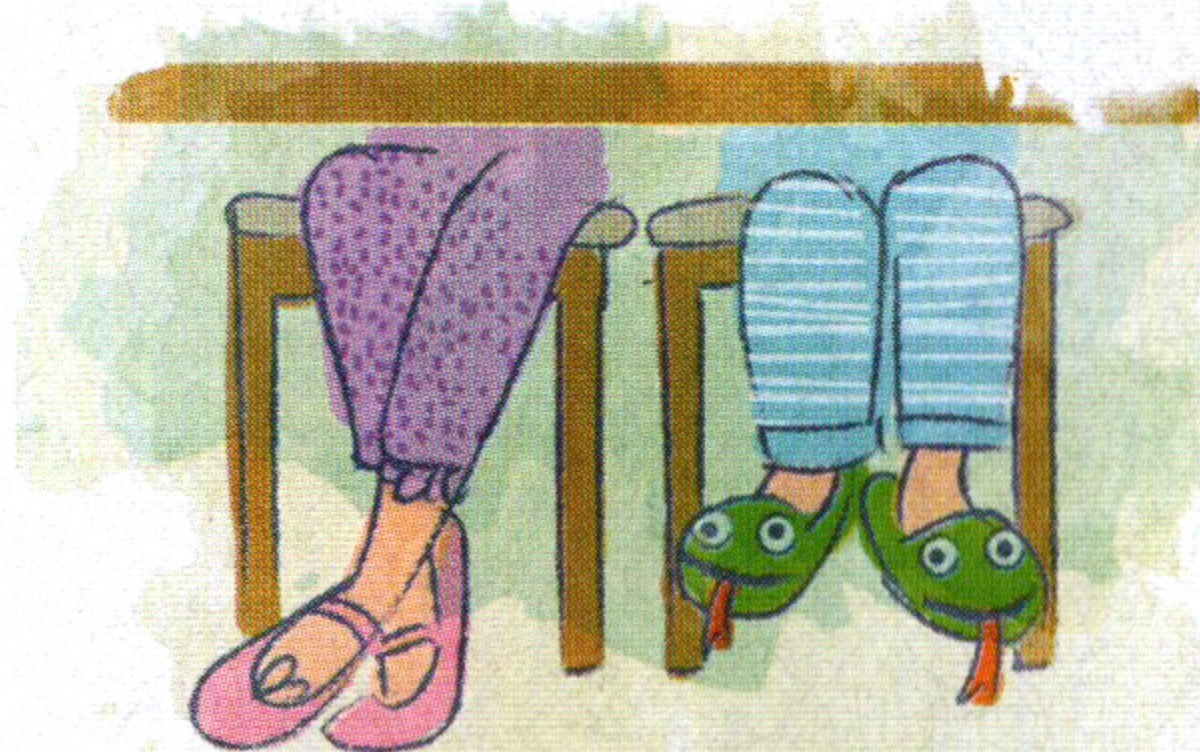
Cute Collection

See if your sibling would like to start a collection with you. Pick something sweet, like hearts, or something silly, like gnomes. Then whenever you're out and see something for the collection, buy it for her or take a picture to share with her later.



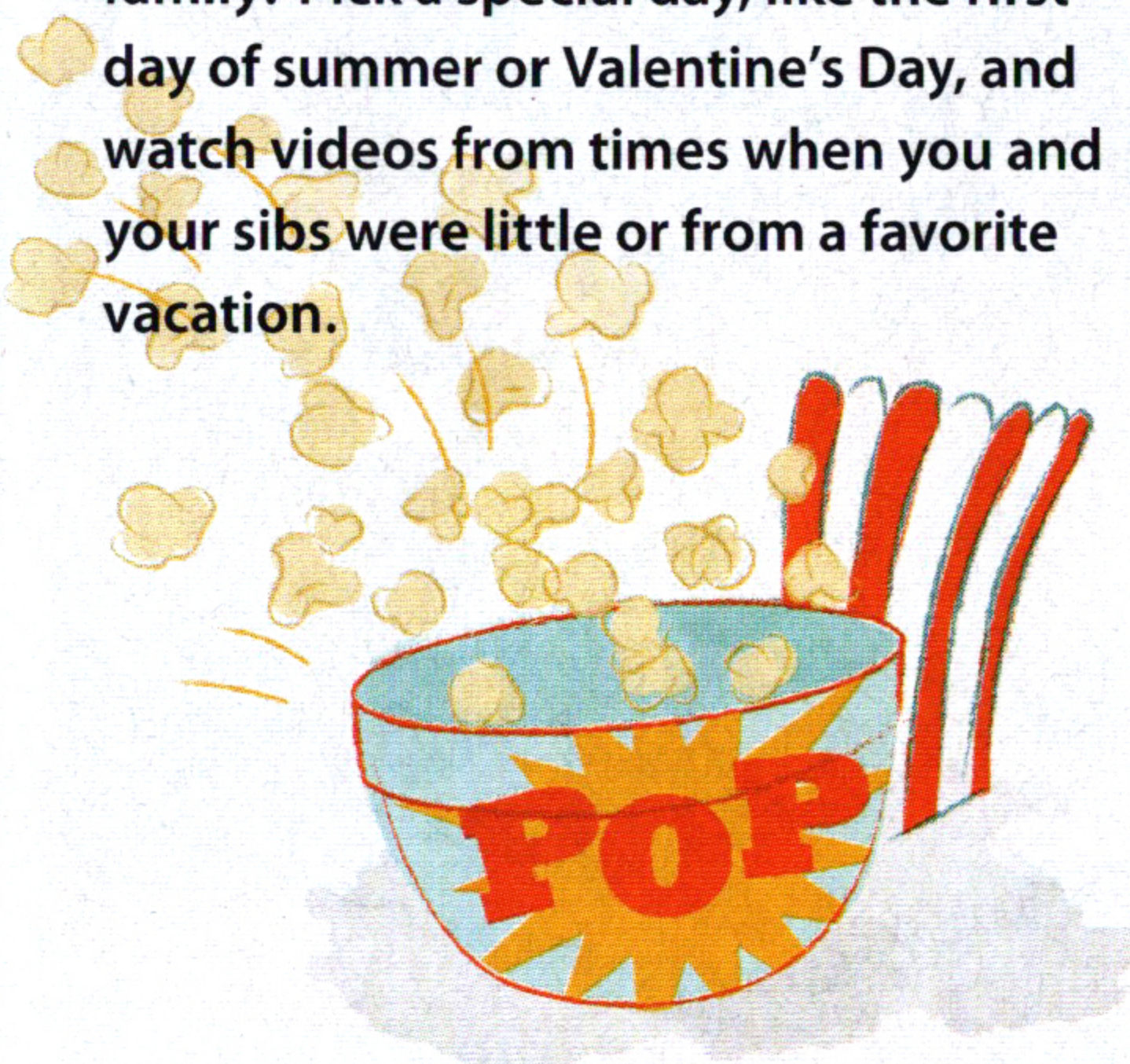
Breakfast for Dinner

 This is a surefire way to cheer everyone up on gloomy days. You and your siblings can help a parent make pancakes, eggs, toast, waffles, smoothies, and whatever else your family likes for breakfast—but do it for dinner. For extra comfort, you can even wear slippers and pj's!



Family Movie Night

Your family might already have a night of watching movies together. But do you ever watch your *family* movies with your family? Pick a special day, like the first day of summer or Valentine's Day, and watch videos from times when you and your sibs were little or from a favorite vacation.



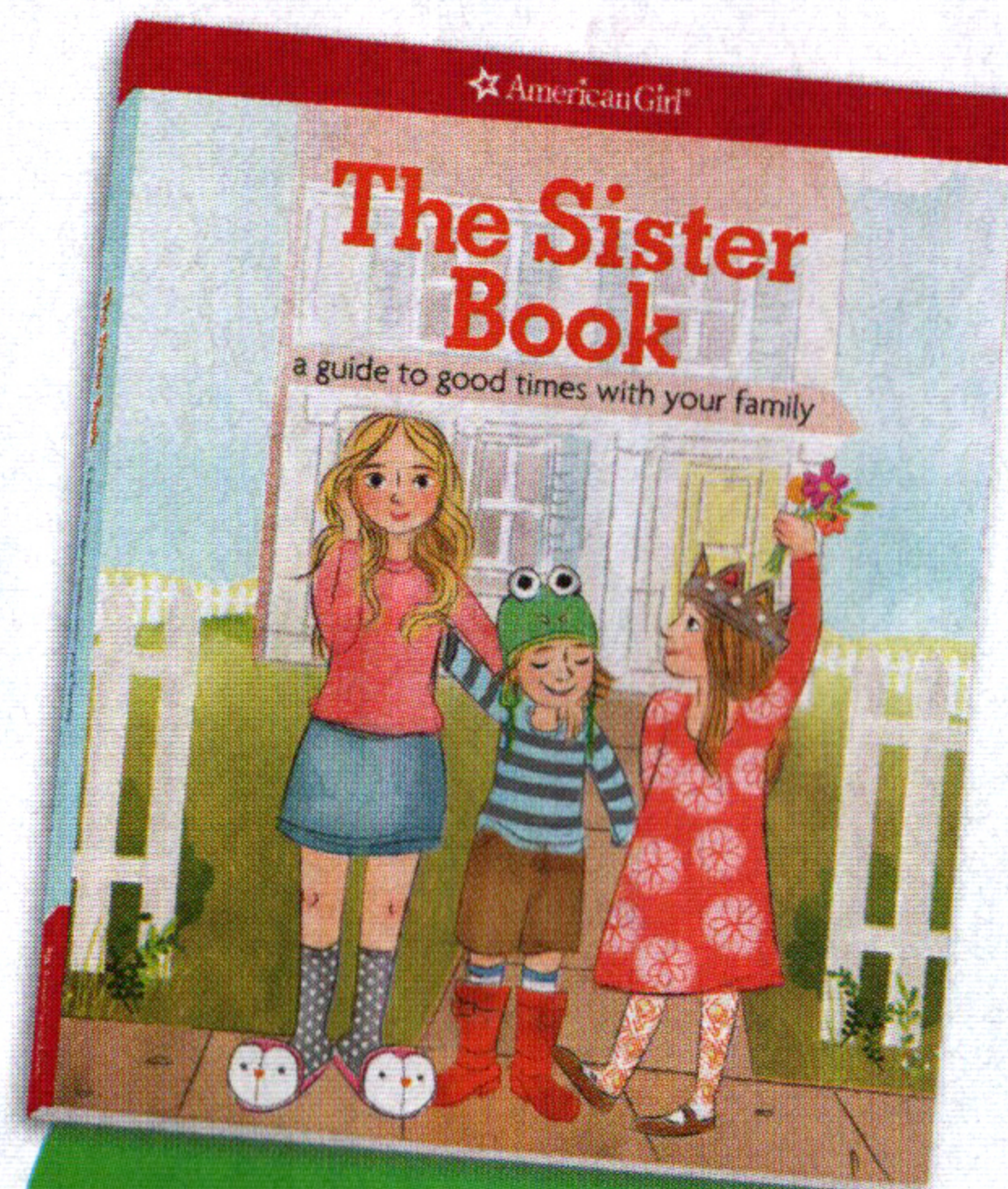
Smiles Across the Miles

Start your day with a giggle. Keep a joke book in the family car, and take turns with your siblings reading a joke every day on the way to school.



Good Things

At dinner, share one good thing from your day. It could be a big thing, like a top grade on a project, or something small, like seeing cute dogs on a walk. Listen to the things your siblings share, too. This helps remind you to be thankful for all the good things in your life—including one another. ★

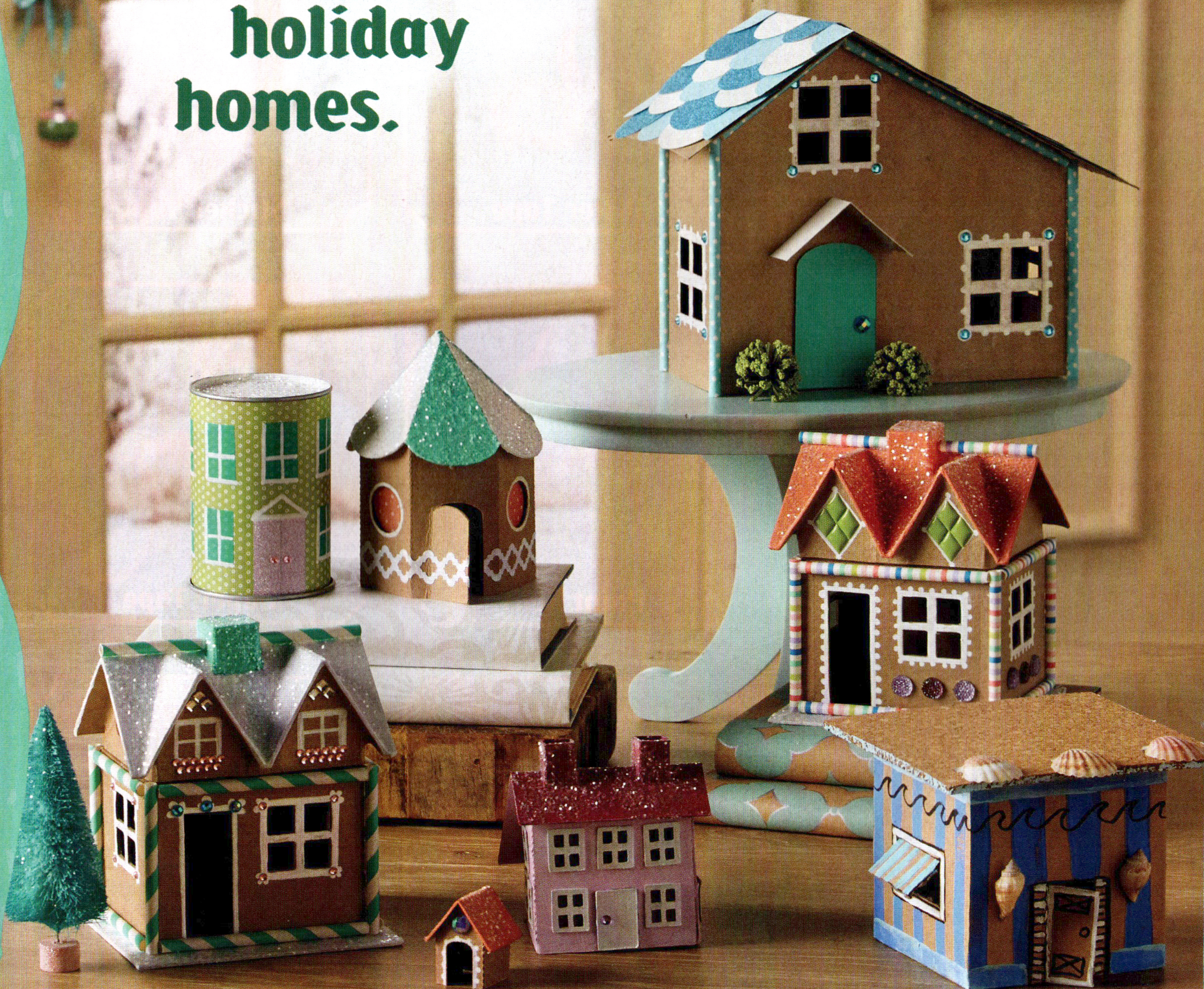


More ideas for adventures with family and siblings can be found in *The Sister Book*, available in bookstores.

cute and crafty cottages



A little imagination
turns cardboard
houses into
**magical
holiday
homes.**



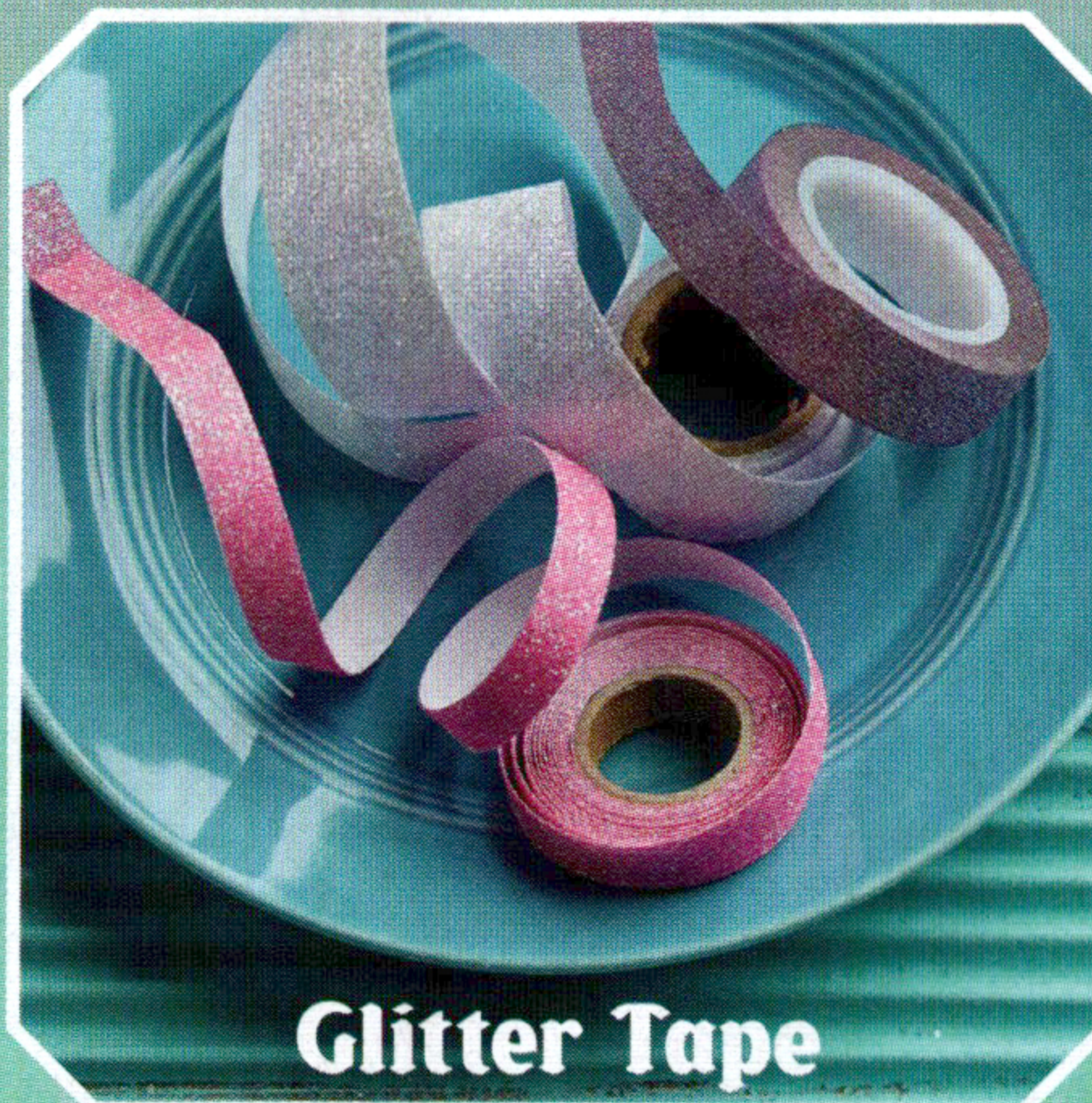
Ready, Set, Decorate

Before you begin, cover your work surface and clothing. Start with a small cardboard house (available at craft stores). You can also use other objects such as cardboard boxes and metal cans.

Next, gather the craft supplies you'll need for decorations, including craft glue and double-stick tape. Here are some decoration ideas to try.



Straws



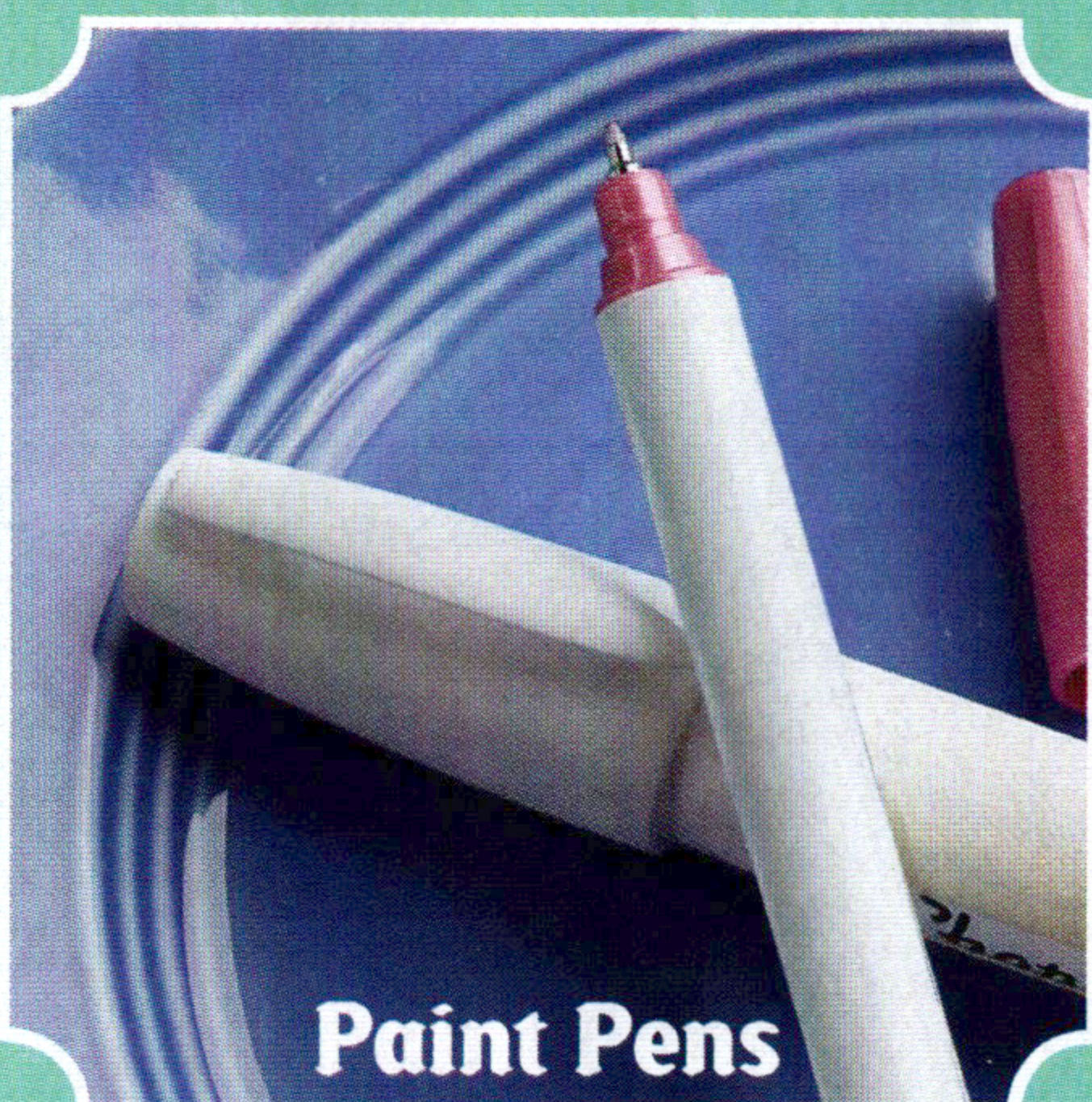
Glitter Tape



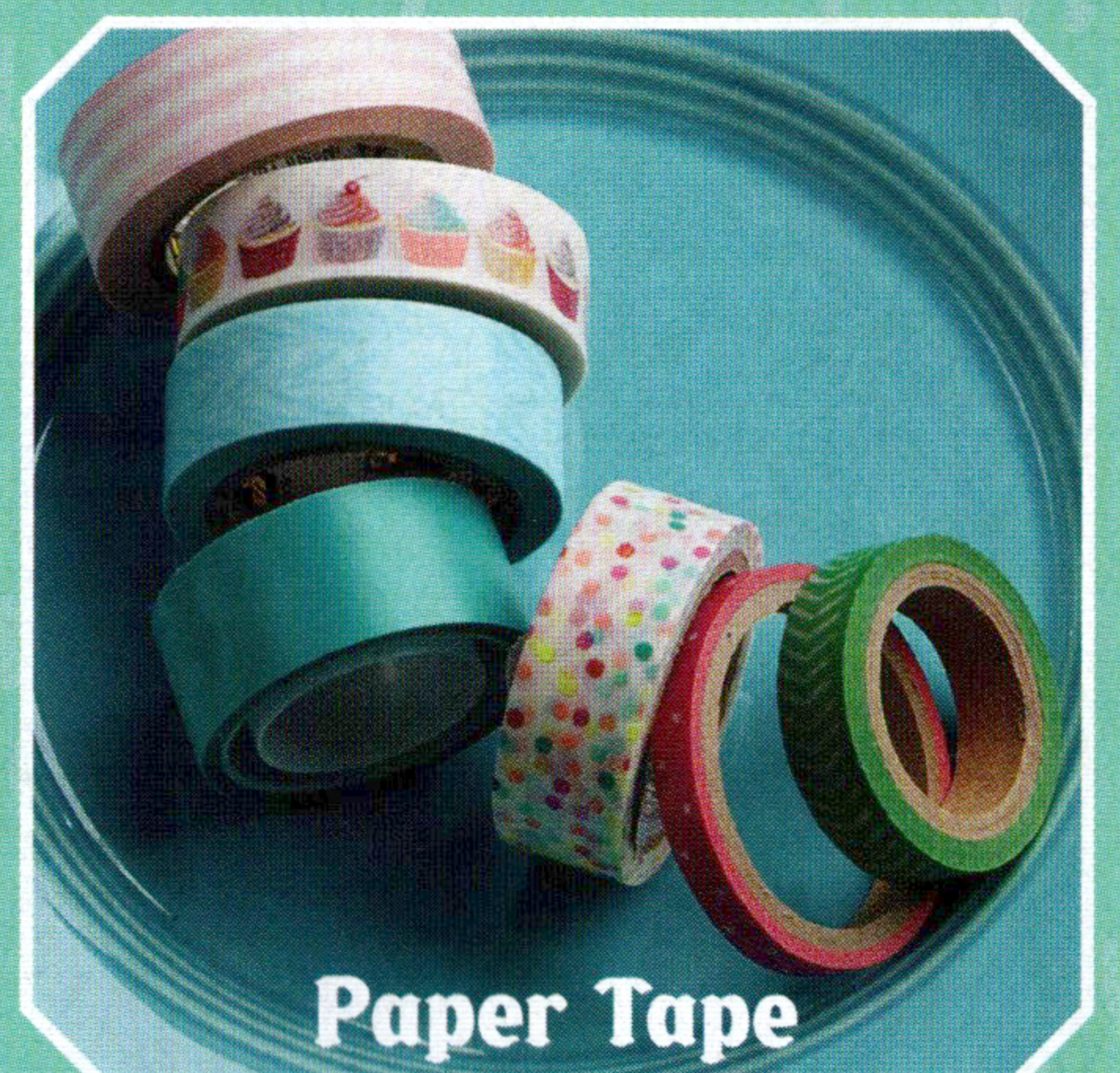
Sticker Tape



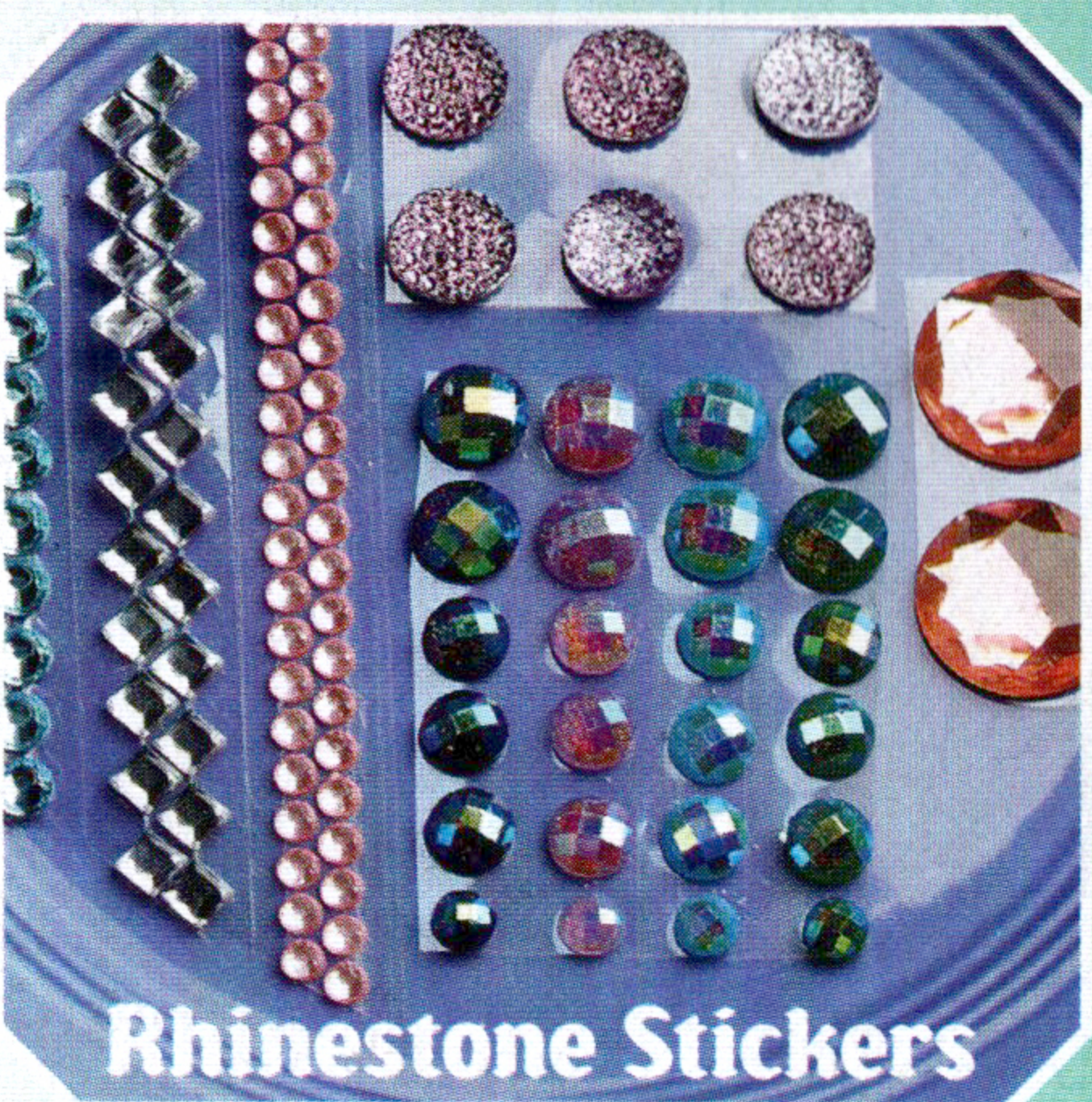
Glitter



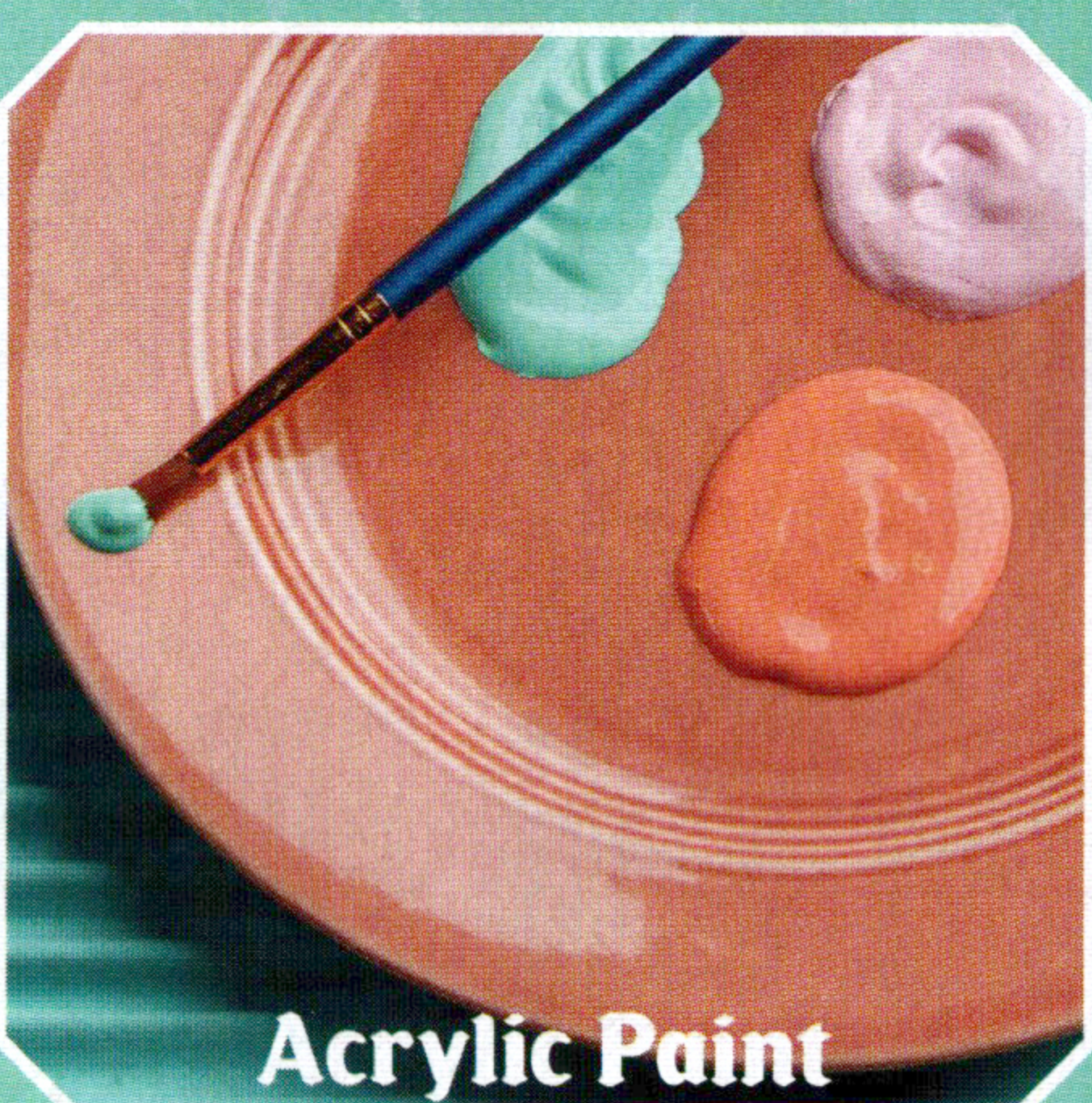
Paint Pens



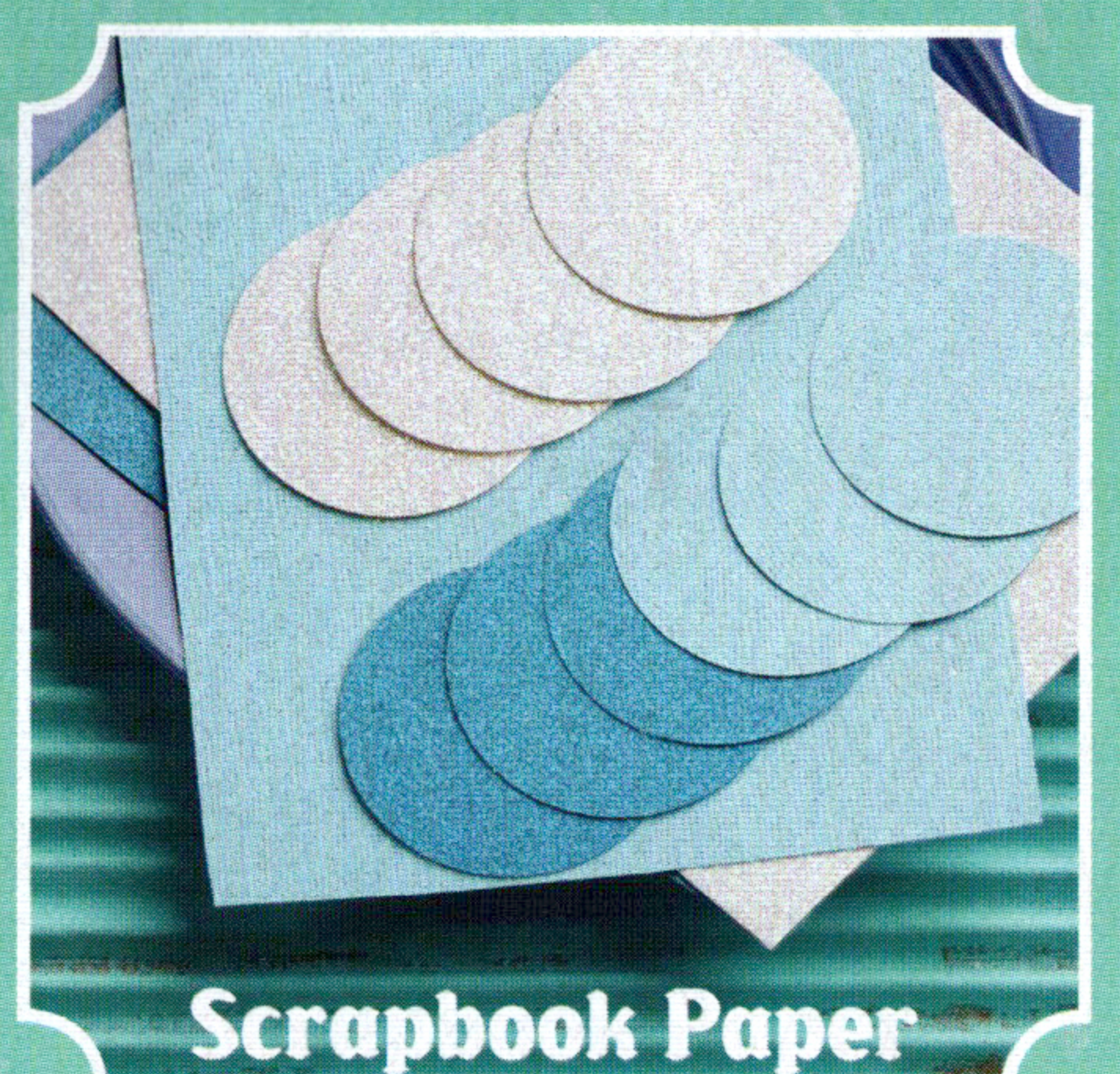
Paper Tape



Rhinestone Stickers



Acrylic Paint



Scrapbook Paper



Safety First!

Use only nonedible decorations for this craft project so it won't spoil. Also, since the cottages look good enough to eat, keep them away from small children and pets.

Welcome to the Winter Fest!

Take this quiz to find out which holiday sweater matches your personality.

1

Which ride would you choose?

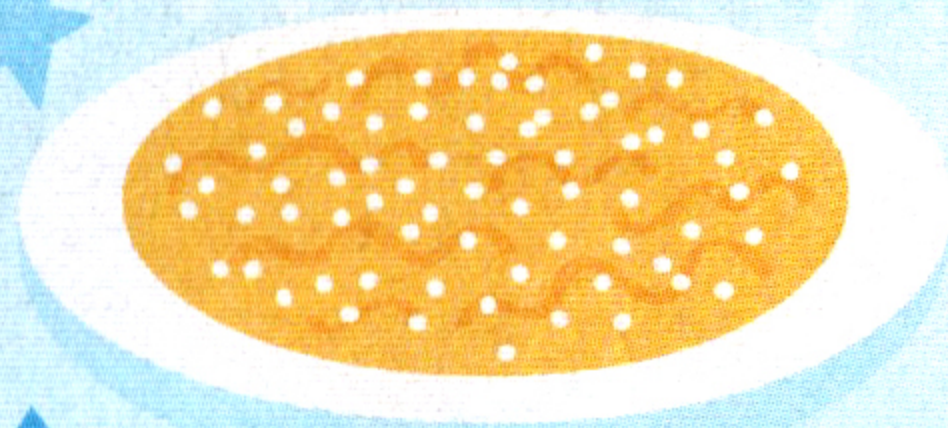
- a. Wooded Maze
- b. Whirling Mugs
- c. Snowflakes Ferris Wheel



4

Which treat would you select?

- a. Funnel cake
- b. Mini donuts
- c. Cotton candy



2

Which game would you prefer?

- a. Rope Ladder Climb
- b. Guess My Age!
- c. Fishbowl Toss



3

Which hat would you buy?

- a.
- b.
- c.



5

Which prize would you want?

- a. Dice erasers
- b. Rubber duck
- c. Glow necklace

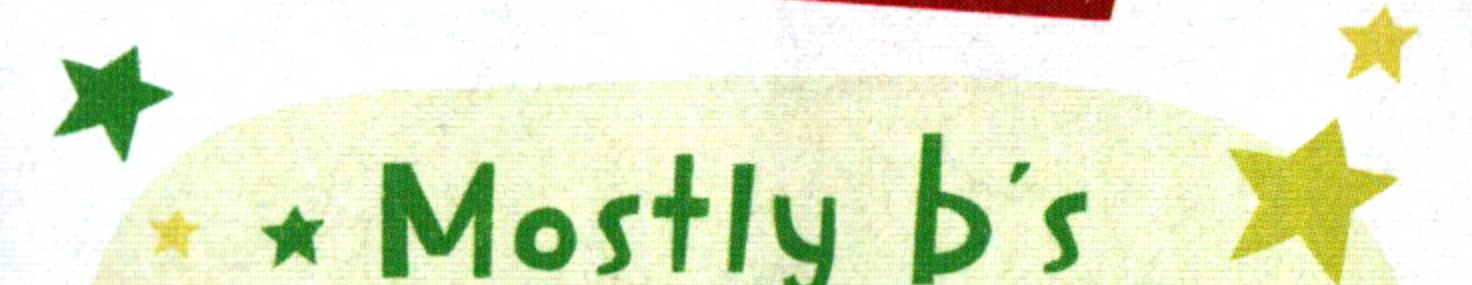


HATS!

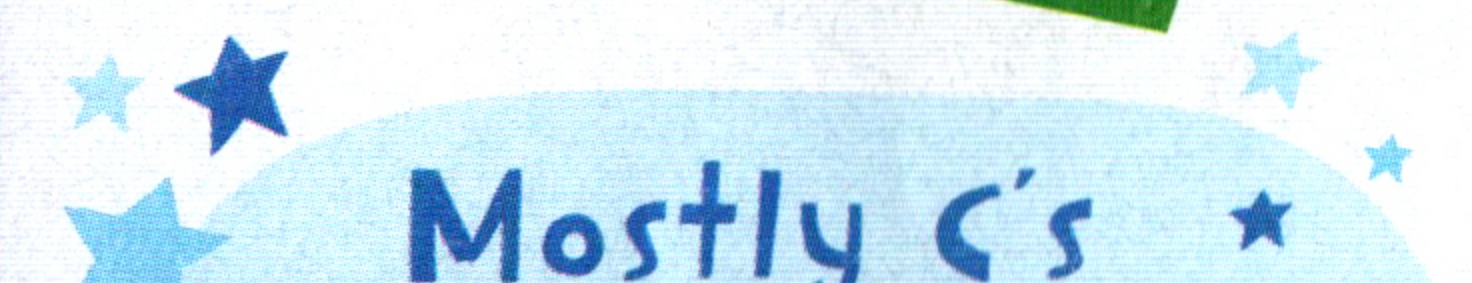


Mostly a's

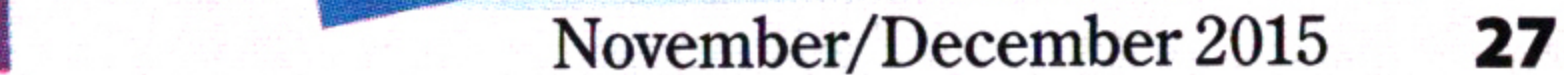
You're a Pretty Pattern sweater!
The designs on this sweater match your creative, curious mind. Solving problems—both in school and with your friends—is your specialty, and your competitive side makes you a great teammate.



You're an **Adorable Animal** sweater! Among your friends, you're often the smiliest and the friendliest—just like the little guy on this sweater. You love to laugh, and your friends can always count on you for great ideas for having fun.



You're a **Sweet Scene** sweater! Happy and daydreamy like this sweater, you're the girl most likely to have a huge imagination. Your carefree style instantly puts others at ease, and your friends love your peaceful, warm personality.



27

a. Holiday Trivia Challenge
b. Christmas Charade-a-Thon
c. Mini-Village Building Competition

- a. Caramel corn
- b. Cheese corn
- c. Kettle corn

- a. Carnival treasure hunt
- b. Goat parade
- c. Ice-statue carving

Forever Family

Meet 11-year-old Amaya, a girl adopted
from foster care—just like her dad.



My daddy and I are very different, but we're a lot alike, too. We both love animals. We like to help others. And we were both in foster care as kids. Foster care is a system set up to care for kids when their own parents can't. Six years ago, my brother Makai and I were in foster care for three months. During that time, we lived with three different sets of foster parents. Then we got adopted.

My daddy and I do lots of things together, like caring for the animals on our little farm. We have ducks, chickens, goats, and two dogs. We also work to help kids who are in foster care today.

When Makai and I were first adopted, everything we had was stuffed into trash bags, one for each of us. That made my daddy feel really bad. When he was a kid in foster care and moving from place to place, he also carried the few things he owned in a trash bag. He says it made him feel like he wasn't worth much. He thinks kids should be treated better than that.

So my daddy started a charity to help kids in foster care feel better about themselves. We provide nice new bags and backpacks for kids to travel with as they move around. We collect new stuff from people who want to help, such as toothpaste and toothbrushes, new underwear, pajamas, and clothes that a child needs for his or her next foster home. I help out a lot—sorting donations and showing volunteers how to pack the bags.

Sometimes we include blankets that we make. The blankets help the kids feel warm. I remember when I was in foster care, the blankets we had were all torn up. There wasn't enough money to buy new ones.

The first time I ever packed a bag at one of our events, it felt great. I chose to pack one for an eight-year-old girl, just like I was at the time. Then I packed one for a toddler. I got straight to work and picked out clothes. I made sure



to put in a stuffed animal and a toy. I made a lot of bags that day. I was so happy about what I was doing that I didn't want to leave when it was time for dinner. So we ordered pizza and kept on packing. Since then, we

invisible. I know because that's how I felt. Kids in that situation can be really sad.

Our bags make foster kids feel as if they're loved. On the earth, every-

When Makai and I were first adopted, everything we had was stuffed into trash bags, one for each of us.

have given away more than 6,000 bags. They are important because when you're in foster care, you might feel like you don't even exist. It's like you're

body's a brother or a sister. It's like the golden rule in school: People should treat others the way they want to be treated. So we try to do that.



When my brother and I got adopted, I was four and he was two. I was scared at first. I didn't know what was going on or where we were going. I didn't smile at all. But then I found a brand-new nightgown on my bed. I started to smile. I had never had my own nightgown before. It was pink with a princess on it. She was wearing a blue gown, and she had a carriage and a prince and everything.

I remember once when I was in third grade, a boy came up to me and asked me if I was adopted. I said I couldn't remember, because I felt too shy to tell him.

When my daddy saw me smile, he hugged me. He started to cry a little. I felt happy because my baby brother and I finally had a forever home. I did still feel sad when I thought of the other foster kids we left behind. Four months later, our parents adopted two more kids, Greyson and Tristan. I love having three little brothers. My parents feed us, love us, and give us everything kids in foster care dream of having someday.

I remember once when I was in third grade, a boy came up to me and asked me if I was adopted. I said I couldn't remember, because I felt too shy to tell him. But it doesn't feel uncomfortable to talk about it now. At home, we talk about it a lot.

And now that I'm in sixth grade, a lot of people know my story. That feels great. I always feel good about myself when my friends are around—one friend





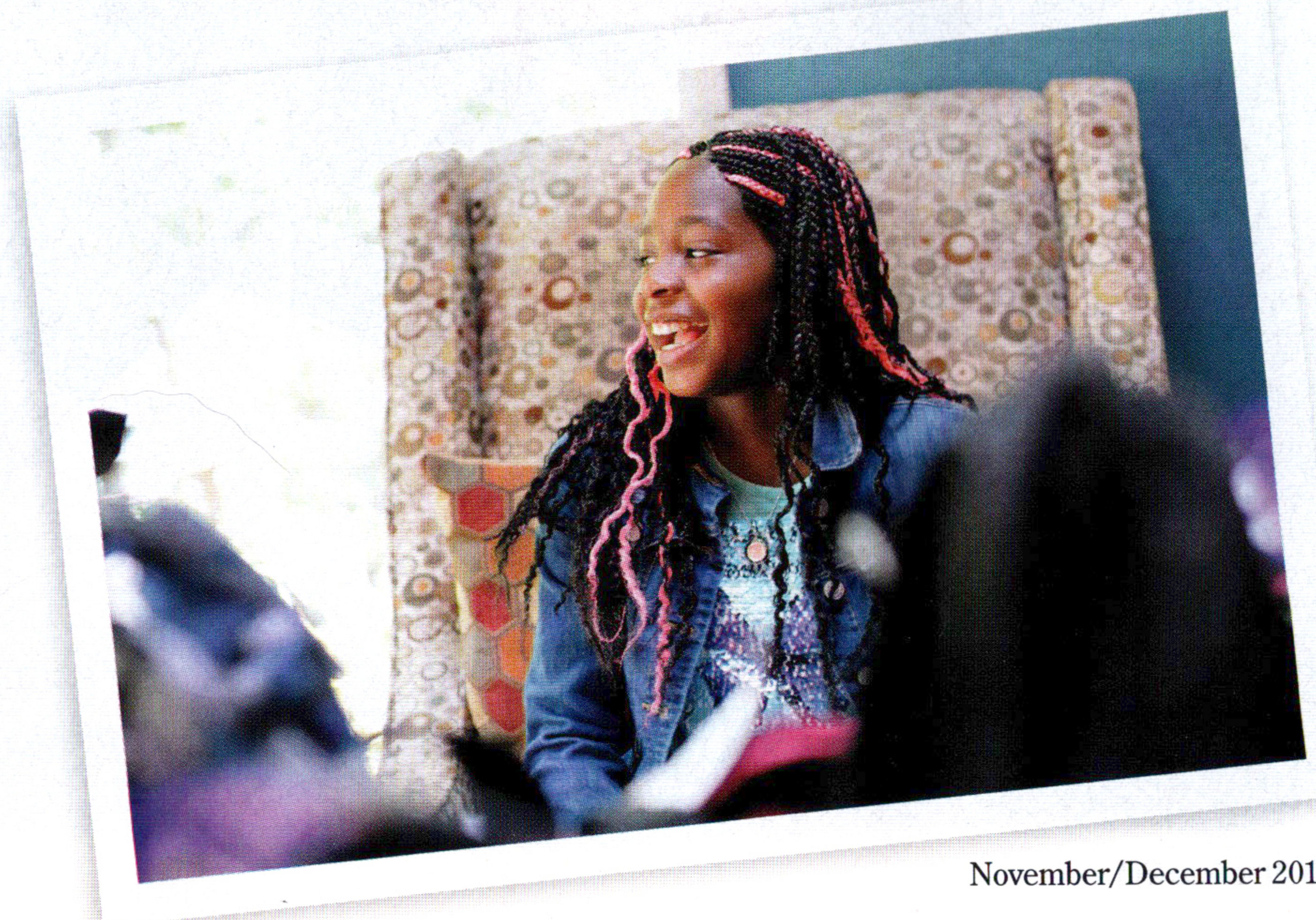
especially. When my friend was little, her mother couldn't take care of her, and so she was adopted. When I heard her story, it sounded a lot like my story. It started out hard, but that part is over.

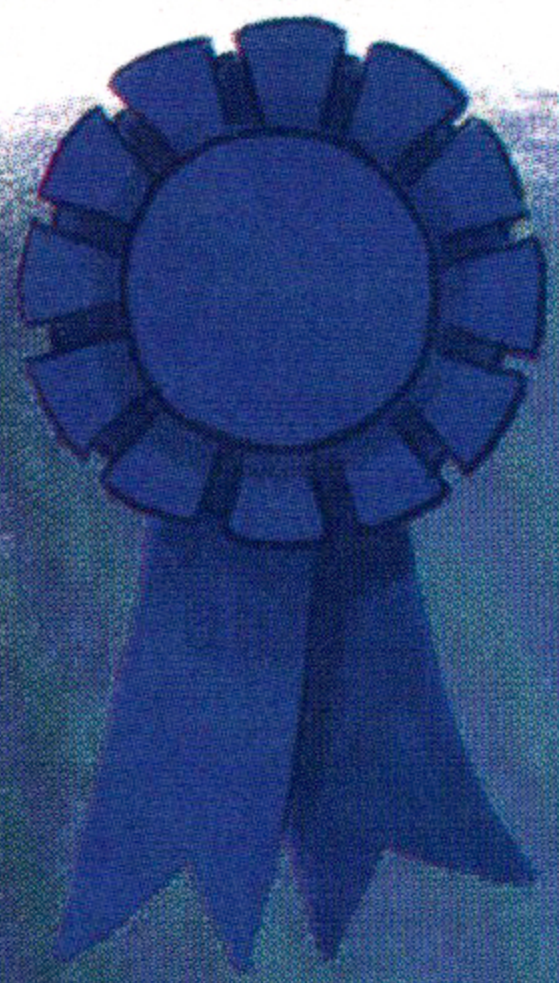
Sometimes we switch up breakfast and dinner. We'll collect eggs from the henhouse and cook them for dinner. When I feed my dog, Kai-lan, or close

the chickens up for the night, I give them love and lots of cheerfulness and happiness, just like my parents give me. ★

Life is good for my family. Last summer, we went out West on a vacation. Then we visited our grandparents in South Carolina. I have my own bank account to save money for college. I work hard in school, and I love to play soccer and basketball. I play the trumpet, and I want to learn to play the piano and ride a horse. Last spring, we had baby goats born on our farm. I loved watching the mother goat teach her babies to head-butt. The moms are really good to their kids.

My brother Tristan and I love to cook.





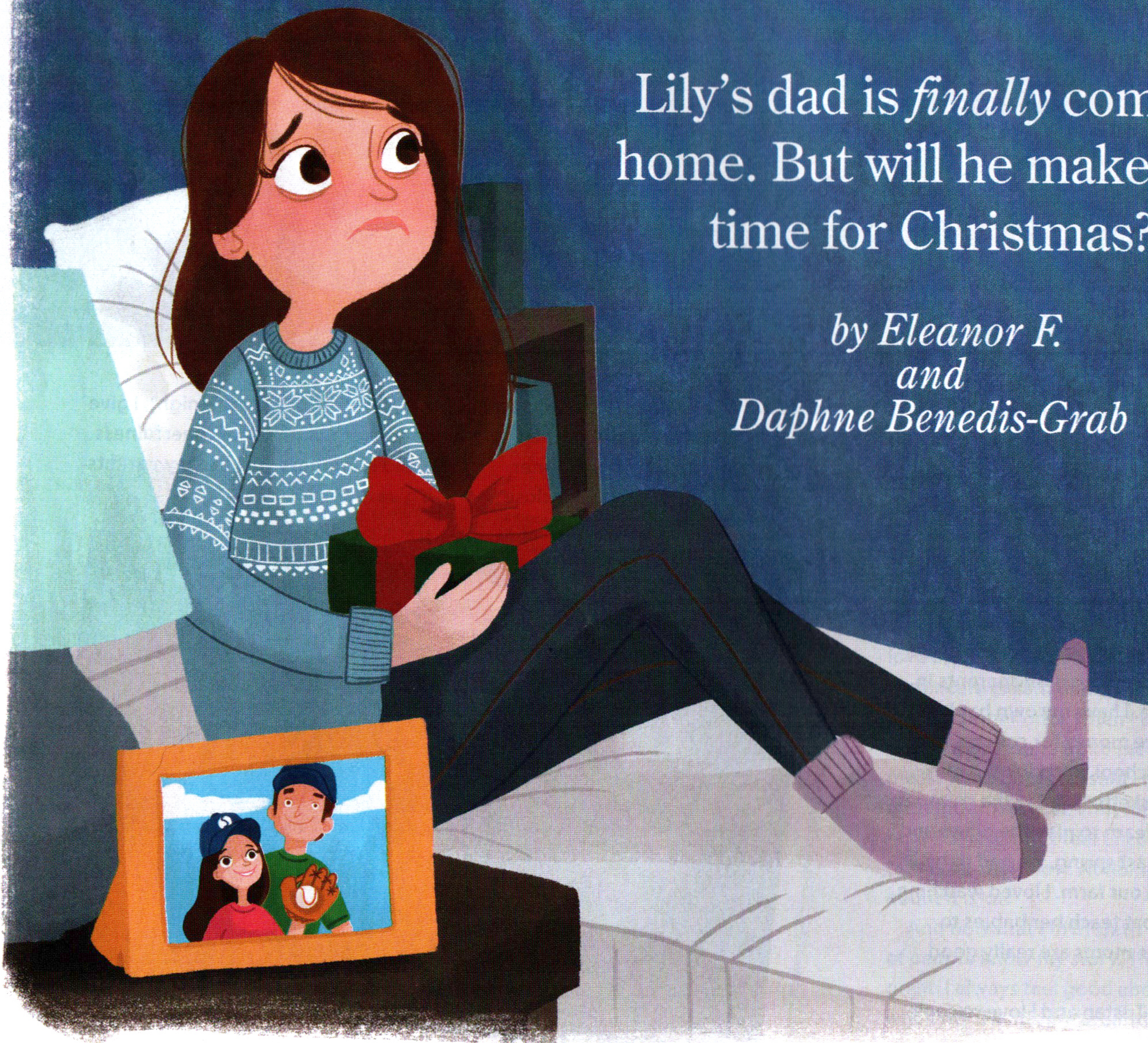
Contest Winner

Earlier this year, we invited readers to enter AG's Story Contest by sending us just the beginning of a story. After the AG staff chose a winning story starter, the winner worked with AG author Daphne Benedis-Grab to finish the story. This is their story.

Almost Home

Lily's dad is *finally* coming home. But will he make it in time for Christmas?

by Eleanor F.
and
Daphne Benedis-Grab





“So if it weren’t for Christopher Columbus, then a lot of us would probably still be living in Europe,” I said to my social studies class, relieved to be at the end of my report.

“Nice job, Lily,” my teacher, Ms. Thomas, said with a smile. “And I think we have time for one more. Madge, are you ready?”

My best friend nearly skipped to the front of the room. Unlike me, she loved speaking in front of big groups.

“I’m going to tell you everything you ever wanted to know about the Native Americans living in America when Columbus arrived,” Madge began. I tried to listen but my mind kept wandering, the way it had been all day. All week, really, ever since Mom, Eddy, and I had gotten the big news.

The bell finally rang and I jumped up, eager to get outside where Mom would be waiting. We had a lot to do this afternoon.

“Just two more days, right?” Madge asked, coming up and squeezing my arm as we walked down the hall, students swarming around us like bees in a hive. An eighth-grade girl almost stepped on my foot as she and her friends ran by. The eighth graders always acted like we sixth graders were invisible, and Madge and I had already vowed we’d be different when we were the oldest kids in the school.

“Yeah, and then my dad will finally be back,” I said happily. I could hardly believe it was true, but after two full years serving in Iraq, Dad was finally coming home!

“Perfect timing,” Madge said. “I bet he got you some great Christmas presents.”

It really was perfect timing. Christmas was in ten days, and Dad would be home to celebrate

with us. But I didn’t need him to bring me anything. My bond with Dad was stronger than anything in the world. So just having him home for my favorite holiday would be the best present ever.

“We’re still caroling on Saturday, right?” Madge asked.

“Of course,” I said. Caroling in our neighborhood was one of the many holiday traditions I loved.

Really, the whole Christmas season was big in my house. Mom and Dad had loved going all out when I was little, decorating our yard and stuffing the biggest tree we could possibly fit into our living room. Tree trimming took all day because each ornament had a special story to tell, like the pewter elf that my parents got on their honeymoon and the glass angel they bought to celebrate my first Christmas home. I’d helped pick out the ornament for my brother Eddy after he was born: a tiny gingerbread man. And then there was





Christmas itself, when Eddy and I would get our parents before the sun rose and all go to the living room together. We'd open gifts slowly, taking the time to appreciate each one, then eat a big breakfast while we were still in our pajamas, carols playing in the background. The rest of the day we'd hang out in front of the tree, cozy as we played with new toys and enjoyed that special time just the four of us.

We all missed Dad when he was away in the army, but the hardest day of all was always Christmas. So we'd been thrilled when we found out that he'd be home in time to celebrate with us. And ever since then, all I could think about was how magical Christmas would be.

Madge and I headed to our locker alcove, where I hurriedly stuffed books into my backpack and slid on my blue down coat. Minnesota winters were freezing, so I pulled my thick wool hat down over my ears before waving to Madge and heading out into the icy afternoon. A thick blanket of snow had fallen, looking like my favorite breakfast, whipped

cream sprayed over waffles.

Mom's car was waiting out front and I could see Eddy in the backseat. I ran toward the car, almost slipping on a big patch of ice. I couldn't wait to get home and start getting everything ready for Dad's return.

But the second I pulled open the car door I could tell something was wrong. Eddy's face was tearstained and the corners of Mom's mouth turned down.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I asked, sinking down in the seat as fear gripped me tight.

Mom took a deep breath. "We got a bit of bad news, Lily," she said. "Dad's been hurt in an explosion."

I gasped, feeling like I'd been punched in the stomach. "Is he OK?"

"His leg is broken and he has some internal injuries, though they can't tell how serious they are until the swelling goes down," Mom said. "Which means he's going to need to stay in the hospital for a while."





"Will he be home for Christmas?" I asked, my whole body tense as I waited for her reply.

Mom reached out and squeezed my hand. "I'm afraid not," she said sadly. "I'm so sorry. But the

"It was just something for English," I told Madge, since that was the one class we didn't have together.

"Lily, are you OK?" Madge asked softly, her

"Lily, are you OK?" Madge asked softly, her face concerned as she looked at me.

three of us will still have a good Christmas."

Her words were hollow, because we all knew it wasn't true. We needed Dad home, and without him, Christmas was ruined.

The next morning at school my eyes were swollen from crying and my head felt stuffed with cotton balls. I walked around in a daze, unable to concentrate on anything. All I could think about was Dad, hurt and far from home, and the fact that he wouldn't be with us for Christmas. By the time the final bell rang all I wanted was to get home and crawl under the covers.

"Hi, Lily," Madge said, coming up behind me as I stuffed my last book into my bag. "Where were you at lunch?"

"I had some work to catch up on, so I went to the library," I told her.

She gave me an odd look. "You're never behind on work," she said. "And it's Friday, so what couldn't wait?"

She'd caught me in the lie. The truth was that I couldn't bear to tell her that Dad had been injured and that all my dreams of the best Christmas ever had been destroyed.

face concerned as she looked at me.

"I'm fine," I said brusquely, to keep from bursting into tears. "And I have to go." I began elbowing my way through the crowd.

"Lily, wait!" Madge called.

But I kept on going.

The next day should have been the best day ever, the day Dad came home. I had planned to be up early, helping Mom clean and prepare a feast for dinner. But instead I burrowed down into my comforter, closing my eyes and hoping to shut out the world. Even the smell of Mom cooking waffles downstairs, hoping to cheer me and Eddy up, wasn't luring me out of bed.

But I knew I couldn't hide forever, so I finally poked my head out. And that's when I noticed the carefully wrapped gift that I'd set on the top of my bookcase. The paper was perfectly folded, the ribbon perfectly curled. I'd spent ages getting it just right, because this wasn't any present: This was my Christmas gift for Dad.

Wrapping the present had taken a long time, but figuring out what to get him had been easy. That's because Dad and I were big baseball fans. One of my best memories came from a game we'd



attended back when I was five. Our favorite rival team, the Brewers, was playing the Twins, and the score was tied going into the ninth inning. That's when our favorite player, Rogers, hit a home run and the ball came flying right toward us. Dad picked me up and hoisted me up onto his shoulders. I squealed as I lifted my little pink baseball mitt to the sky and grasped the ball. We'd called it our lucky ball ever since, and when Dad went off to the army, I'd made sure he took it with him, to keep him safe. And this year for Christmas I'd gotten Dad a mitt, so we could catch another lucky ball at a game next season. Since he was coming home I figured we'd be able to go to a few of them.

But now I wasn't sure of that or anything else. So I grabbed the gift and stuffed it in the closet, unable to look at it for a second longer.



Later that afternoon our phone rang. Since most of Mom's calls came on her cell and not our landline, I knew there was a good chance that this call was about Dad. I rushed downstairs and sure enough, Mom was smiling as she said, "Thank you so much, Sergeant."

Then she hung up the phone and beamed. "Good news," she said. "Dad is feeling good enough to talk, so they've arranged for us to have a video chat in twenty minutes."

Eddy began jumping around, and I kind of wanted to also, even though I felt too old. We'd only had a few video chats with Dad when he was in Iraq, because the video feed was often down, but the ones that had happened had been great. Dad told stories and laughed as we talked about school, Eddy's karate class, and my soccer games. He always had our lucky ball in one hand, reminding me of our special day together. Just seeing that and his face with his grin made it feel like he was right here with us, even when he was half a world away.

And then I had a great idea. "Mom," I said eagerly, "do you think we can try to have a video chat with Dad on Christmas?"

"Yes, yes!" Eddy shouted.

Mom grinned at both of us. "I love that idea," she said. "Let's ask."

Twenty minutes later the three of us were grouped around the computer. Eddy was clutching his latest painting to show Dad and I had my report on Christopher Columbus. Dad liked history, so I knew he'd want to hear part of it. And just when I thought I couldn't wait any longer, the blank screen flashed for a moment and then we could see him, my dad. He was pale against the white sheets of the hospital bed but his smile was huge.

"Dad!" Eddy and I both shouted.



"Hey, kids," Dad said. "And Jackie. I—"
And just like that the screen flashed again,
and this time it went blank.

her, not understanding what she was talking about
or why she was here. All I could think about was
how we wouldn't see Dad's face on Christmas.

"But it's incredibly lucky that he wasn't more seriously injured,
that he's still able to come home to us at all."

"Mom, what happened?" I asked with a gasp.
"I don't know," Mom said, frowning as she
pressed some keys on the computer. But nothing
she did brought Dad back.

"I'll just call and see if anyone at the base
knows what happened," Mom said tightly.

A few minutes later we had our answer: The
video feed had gone down.

"When will it be back up?" I asked Mom in a
loud whisper as she spoke to the army officials.
"And can we talk to Dad on Christmas?"

She waved me quiet so she could hear, but then
she asked my question. In the silence after, while
she listened to the response, I saw her face fall.

"Can we talk to Dad soon?" Eddy asked the
moment Mom said good-bye.

"I'm afraid not," Mom said. "The feed is down
indefinitely because the tech workers who fix it
are on leave until after the holidays."

"So we can't even video-chat with Dad on
Christmas?" I cried, unable to believe this terrible
turn.

"No," Mom said sadly.

Tears pricked my eyes just as the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Mom said quietly. She returned a
moment later with Madge.

"Are you ready?" she asked me. I stared back at

"The carolers are gathering at the community
center," Madge said.

"I can't go," I said shortly.

"Why?" Madge asked, her eyes going wide.

"I can't talk about it," I snapped. I knew none of
this was Madge's fault, but I couldn't stop myself.
"Just leave me alone."

Madge's face crumpled as I fled upstairs to my
room.

The next morning there was a soft knock
at my door.

"Come in," I called, struggling to sit up.
I'd tossed and turned all night, and my head was
aching almost as much as my heart.

"Hi," Mom said, coming in and sitting on the
edge of my bed. "How're you doing?"

The kindness in her voice undid me. "I wish
Dad was coming home for Christmas," I wailed.

Mom hugged me close and rubbed my back the
way she had when I was little, just after a night-
mare. I was probably too old, but it felt really good.
"I know," she murmured. "I feel the same way."

"It's just so unfair," I said, my sadness giving
way to anger.

Mom released me and looked into my eyes as



she spoke. "It's unlucky that Dad won't be with us this holiday," she said. "But it's incredibly lucky that he wasn't more seriously injured, that he's still able to come home to us at all."

I'd been so busy feeling disappointed about this Christmas, the one I'd been looking forward to so much, that I hadn't really thought about that.

"And that means Dad will be with us next Christmas, and the one after that and the one after that," Mom went on, brushing a strand of hair from my cheek. "And to me that's a pretty terrific Christmas gift, even if we don't get him with us this time around."

Everything she said was true, and the words loosened something inside me. Yes, I was disappointed about this Christmas, but the most important thing was Dad coming home at all.

"You're right," I told Mom.

Mom smiled at me. "So what do you say you, me, and Eddy still make this Christmas fun?"



"OK," I agreed.

"That's my girl," Mom said with a smile. "Why don't you get ready and we can go pick up some last-minute supplies?"

"Sure," I said. "But can I make a call first? I owe Madge a big apology."

Mom nodded. "Absolutely," she said. "And I think Madge will understand."

I was pretty sure she would too, once I finally explained what had happened.

Mom left and I went into my closet to grab a sweater. As I pulled it off the shelf I noticed the gift for Dad, the mitt I'd wrapped so carefully. I took it out of the closet, ready to have it around again. I set it back on my bookcase, but then, as I was about to go down for breakfast, I hesitated. And then I took the present and brought it down with me, tucking it carefully under the tree. Dad might not be home on Christmas, but he'd have his gift waiting whenever he made it back to us.

Christmas Eve Mom, Eddy, and I made cookies and sat in front of the tree eating them and listening to carols. I knew we were all trying our best to be cheerful, but I knew we were missing Dad. And it was going to be even harder tomorrow, no matter how much we worked to make it a special day.

"Anyone want more milk?" Mom asked, picking up her glass.

Just then the doorbell rang.

"It's late for a visitor," Mom said, frowning slightly.

"Maybe it's carolers," I said. "I'll go see."

I headed to the door, opened it, and then stood speechless at the threshold. For a second I was



sure I must have been imagining things, but I blinked and he was still there.

“Dad!” I shouted, throwing myself into his arms, barely noticing his bulky cast and metal crutches. He stumbled a bit but then wrapped me in a strong hug.

Mom and Eddy had heard me and a moment later they were there too, the four of us hugging and laughing and crying on the front stoop as snow fell gently around us.



“How did you manage to make it back to us?” Mom asked, finally letting go of Dad.

“My injuries weren’t as bad as they initially appeared,” Dad said. And then he turned to me with his familiar grin. “Probably because I had this with me.” He held up our lucky baseball.

It really was the best Christmas ever, even better than I’d dreamed it would be. ★



Meet the Author

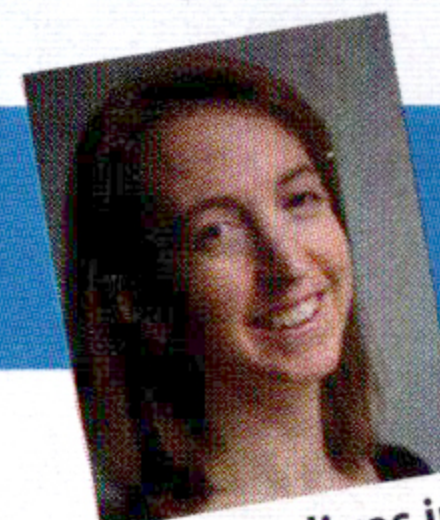


Eleanor, age 11,
lives in Wisconsin.

Eleanor F.

This story was inspired by a friend at school whose dad serves in the military. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to have a parent be away during wartime. Besides writing, I love baking and making crafts.

Meet the Author



Daphne lives in
New York.

Daphne Benedis-Grab

There are so many things I’m excited to celebrate during the holidays, like the fun of creating this story together with Eleanor, and my new book, *Clementine for Christmas*. But what I’m most excited to celebrate every year is the way Christmas brings us all closer together!

This or That:

Winter Wonderland

Would you rather...

enter a Christmas
carol competition

OR

a December
dance-a-thon?

ski on giant
candy canes

OR

sled on a giant
frosted cookie?

wrap presents in
Santa's workshop

OR

examine snowflakes
under a microscope?

design personalized
snowboarding
goggles

OR

colorful cozy
blankets?

go to a winter
light festival

OR

discover a secret
frozen waterfall?

go to winter
adventure camp

OR

on a snowshoe
expedition with
your friends?

have a mini version of
your neighborhood
in a snow globe

OR

an exact replica
of your home made
into a dollhouse?

make snow angels
in powdered sugar

OR

lick
candy icicles?

visit the world's biggest
ice-skating rink

OR

the highest ski jump?

go Christmas shopping
in New York City

OR

take your family
on an ice cave
excursion?

sport polar
bear slippers

OR

a snowy owl hat?

ride on a sleigh
pulled by reindeer

OR

take care of a
baby penguin?



HELP!

Dear American Girl,

I always back out of sleepovers. At first, I'm excited. But then I miss my family, and my parents have to come get me. Embarrassing!

I can't sleep over

Sleepovers aren't right for everyone. But if they're important to you, how about planning a half-sleepover? Arrange to spend the evening at a friend's home and then to go home late. Wear pajamas and do sleepover stuff, like watching movies and doing each other's hair. You can also enjoy sleepovers at your own home, with your family close by.



Dear American Girl,

One of my friends always says that my other friends are taking me away from her. Can't I play with lots of friends?

friend

Real friends—even the closest ones—should never feel as if they're restricted from having other friends. But your friend may be feeling left out or insecure. Explain to her that your having other friends doesn't make your friendship with her any less important. Communication can help—share with her when you can play and when you've made other plans. Talk to a parent if it doesn't.



Dear American Girl,

I LOVE animals, but I'm too young to volunteer at the shelter. How do I figure out what to do to help instead?

too young

One great way to help animals is to raise money for groups that protect them. Donate the money you raise to your local shelter, or find out what items the shelter needs—such as cleaning supplies, toys, or pet food. Use the money you've raised to buy the items, and deliver them. Bonus: The people at the shelter will already know you by the time you are old enough to volunteer!



Dear American Girl,

When my teachers talk about big tests, like our state exam coming up, I get SO anxious. What am I to do?

Nervous

Pre-test nervousness is only a problem when it gets in the way of your doing your best. Instead of seeing a test as scary, think of it as a chance to show off all you can do. If you're feeling anxious, take some deep breaths and remind yourself: *I can do this.* Also, ask what's allowed during testing breaks—maybe free reading or using a device? Be ready to do an activity that relaxes you.



MORE HELP!

Dear American Girl,

When I tell stories, I want my friends to like them and laugh if they're funny. So sometimes I make up parts just to make my friends laugh. How can I make my stories interesting without making things up?

Storyteller

Making up sections of true stories usually isn't the way to go, and it's good that you get that. (After all, friends can't trust you if they can't believe what you say.) You don't need to make things up to be funny. Every person sees the world in a unique way, and that is where a person's own humor comes from. Before you start a story, think about true parts of it that you can make funny. Act them out. Try different voices. Give your story enthusiasm and energy, or throw in a random funny detail. Storytelling is something you can get good at—just stick to the truth. If you find yourself straying, own it. Say, "OK, maybe I exaggerated that a little." Keep working to break this habit.



Dear American Girl,

All I have been doing these past few weeks is yawn, yawn, yawn. I'm going cuckoo with the yawning! But I don't feel tired.

Tired?

You might not be getting enough sleep. Go to bed 30 minutes (or more) earlier than usual for at least a week, and see if you yawn less. Tell a parent that you've been yawning a lot, in case you're having sleep



issues that you don't know about, such as major snoring that keeps you from reaching the deep sleep that helps you to feel rested when you wake up. Make sure, too, that you're getting plenty of water and exercise every day—that's a good way to help you reach restful sleep. Talk to your doctor if you keep yawning.



Dear American Girl,

Agewise, I'm in the middle of all my cousins. I feel too old to hang out with the younger kids and too young to hang out with the older kids.

What do I do?

It's common to not quite know how you fit in with a group of kids who aren't all the same age. How do you decide where to go? Hang out with whichever group is doing something that looks fun, no matter their age. This is your family, so there's no reason for things to be awkward. If different groups of cousins are excluding others or not treating one another well, go to a parent for help.





Dear American Girl,

I'm getting worried that one of my friends is keeping too many secrets from me. She always says, "It's personal" or "I don't think you can handle it."

Help!

Friends sometimes share secrets, thinking that they'll feel closer. But once a secret is out, it can never be a secret again, and shared secrets can sometimes wreck friendships. Your friend is wise to keep some personal things to herself, and it won't do any good for you to pressure her about it. Strengthen your friendship by sticking up for each other, making each other smile, and, above all, respecting each other's boundaries.



Dear American Girl,

My parents won't let me have a phone, but every single one of my friends has one. They always talk about how much fun it is to text and talk. I'm left out.

no phone

Feeling left out is no fun. But your friends probably aren't trying to hurt you. You can let one or two



close friends know that this bothers you, but you can't control what your group talks about. Let your parents know how you're feeling. Make sure you understand their rules about phones and the reasons for them, and see if there is any way for you to earn a phone. There might not be, but it shouldn't hurt to talk about it.



Dear American Girl,

I am homeschooled, which is great. But when we're out around town on a weekday, I feel like people are staring at me and wondering why I'm not in school.

uncomfortable

Maybe people are wondering why you're not in school. Or maybe they're thinking, *Oh, she must be homeschooled.* There's no way to

know. Also, it's unlikely that anything would happen even if someone were wondering. But say someone did ask you or your parent about school. The answer would be, "She's homeschooled," and that would be that. Anyone who feels self-conscious in public might feel better by thinking through the worry she's having. If this happened, how would I react? Knowing and practicing the answer might help you to feel more secure.



Advice from You

"Good friends are like stars.

You don't always see them, but you know they're always there."

Adrianna H.

Age 11, Wisconsin

Need advice? Got advice? Write:

Help!

American Girl magazine

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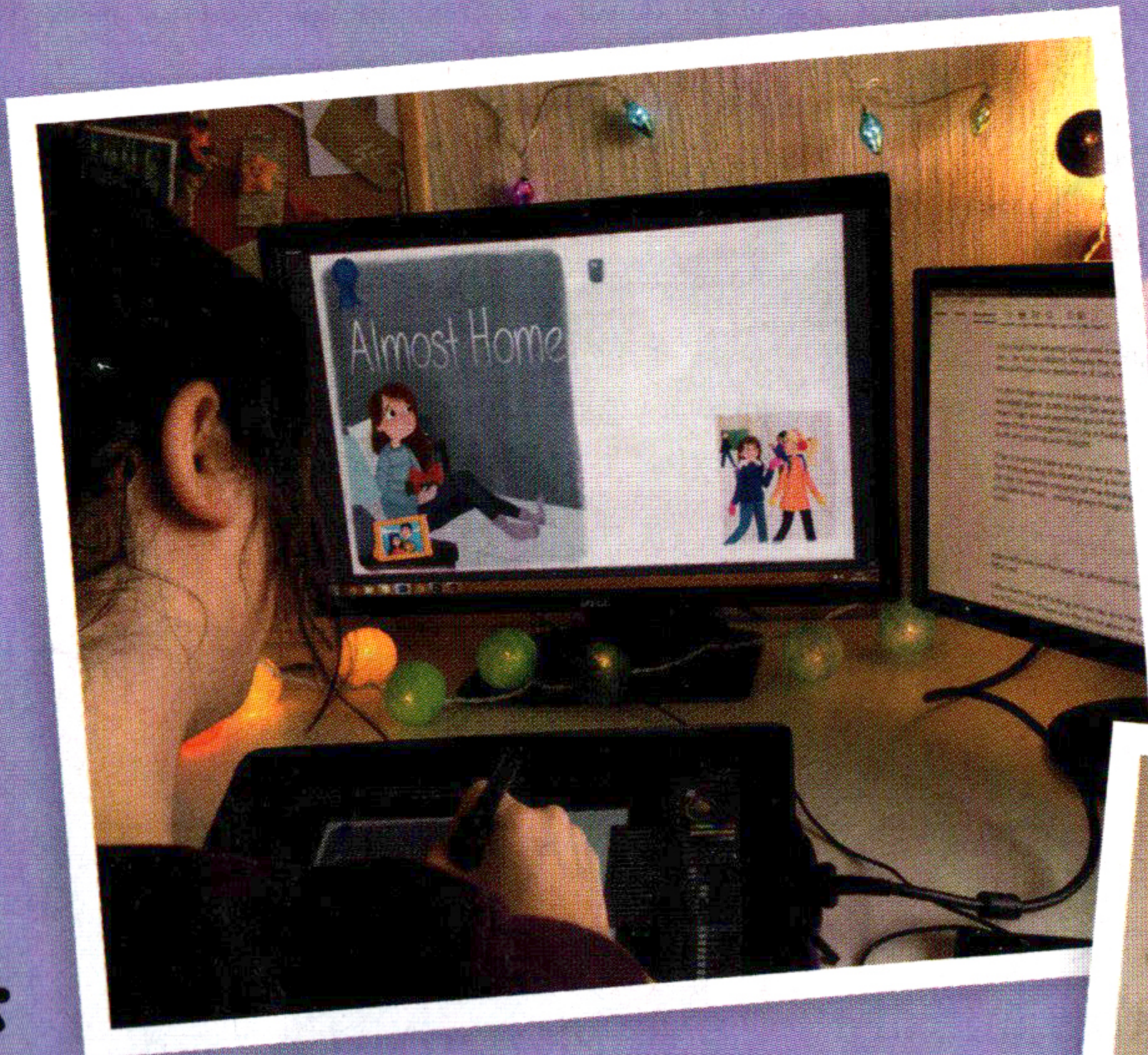
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We can't respond to all letters.

But we read everything you send!



11-year-old Raven of Pennsylvania didn't stop at just one elf drawing!

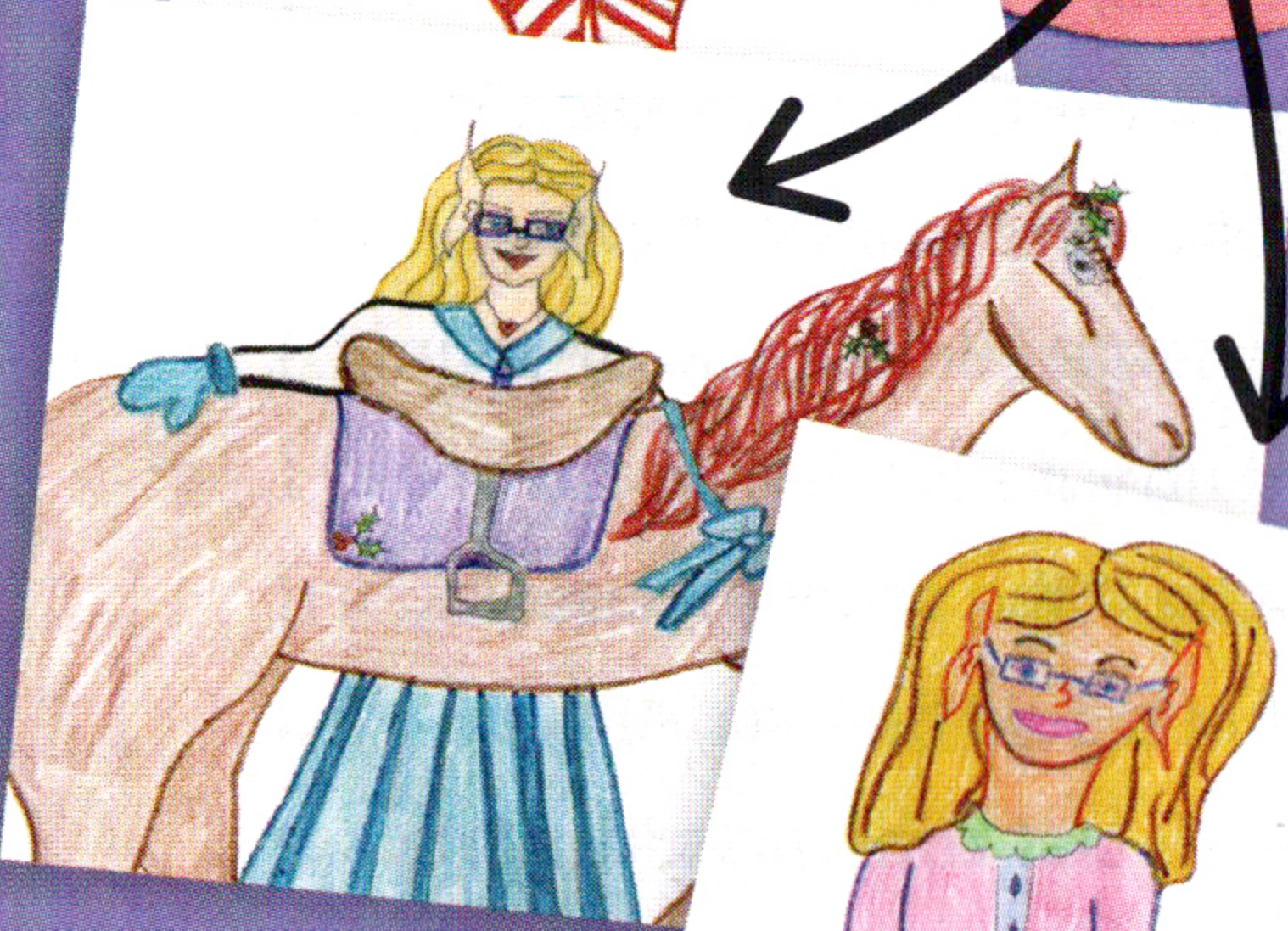


This is our illustrator Natalie Smillie creating drawings for our fiction story. Natalie served in the air force, like Lily's dad, who served in the army in our story!



Behind the Scenes

Making this issue of *American Girl* magazine put us in the holiday spirit!



The Lil Cupcake Girls shared their favorite buttercream frosting recipe!



woof

13-year-old Liv of Wisconsin made two little clay dogs. They look great with our tiny doghouse!



yum



Ingredients:

- * 8 ounces (2 sticks) of unsalted butter, room temperature
- * 12 ounces cream cheese
- * 1 lb confectioners' sugar
- * 1 tsp organic vanilla extract

Directions:

Place unsalted butter in a mixer on medium speed and mix until the butter is smooth and fluffy. Next, add cream cheese and mix it until it's smooth. Gradually add the confectioners' sugar on low speed to avoid the sugar flying everywhere! Finally, add the vanilla extract and mix on medium/high speed to blend the flavors together and create a delicious cream cheese frosting.

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